MARY AUSTIN

Mary Austin writing contest winners 2011

Earlier this year, a Bishop couple set out to help inspire the youth of the Eastern Sierra via the first writing contest of its kind in Inyo and Mono counties.

The purpose of the Mary Austin Award for Writing as conceived by a generous local couple was three-fold: to get youth interested in the outdoors; interested in writing; and interested in printed media – newspapers in particular.

The contest was open to all students in Inyo and Mono counties who were entering the 12th grade in the 2011-12 school year.

The entry period essentially ran through this past summer, with a total of nine essays being received from Eastern Sierra seniors.

The parameters of the essay contest were fairly simple; submissions needed only to describe, in some manner, a non-fiction outdoor experience in Inyo or Mono counties. How that outdoor experience was explored in the essay was up to the writer.

Earlier this month, at the behest of the creators of the Mary Austin Award for Writing, *The Inyo Register* assembled an eight-person panel to judge the students' essays. The panel was comprised of passionate outdoor enthusiasts, writers and retired educators.

In the end, all panel members were impressed, heartened and, yes, inspired by the entries received and the effort put into each essay by the nine Inyo and Mono students who participated.

In the words of one of the judges, these young writers went beyond merely describing an event set in the great outdoors; rather, they described "how their experience in the mountain environment moved each author viscerally and distilled theirs worlds into a more simpler place than they knew existed. They let their experiences along the eastern escarpment fundamentally effect their view of the world."

Narrowing the field to handful of "winners" was not easy; each and every essay was a jewel in its own right.

That being said, following are the five essays ultimately selected for publication this inaugural year. In addition, the five authors have been awarded cash prizes each of $200 for their efforts by the contest creators.

All participants will receive a copy of Norman Schaefer's new book, "Sunny Top Of California (Sierra Nevada Poems and A Story)," courtesy of *The Inyo Register.*

The author (l) helps with a stewardship project in the Thousand Island Lake area. Photo submitted

Untitled

By Alekos McKee

Being an avid biker, skier, and all-out mountain man, I truly enjoy nature and all the wonderful gifts it offers; its alpine lakes, green meadows bursting with mountain flowers, quite streams, and staggering mountain peaks. This is exactly the reason for volunteering for Friends of the Inyo, an organization dedicated to keeping nature pure and beautiful. For seven days and six nights I spent my time rebuilding eroded and destroyed hiking trails and enjoying the beautiful landscape at Thousand Island Lake at the base of Banner Peak.

The group of five, which consisted of myself, Todd Vogel, FOI stewardship director, and three other members of FOI, left the Mammoth Pack Station and head off to the trail head with tools, clothes, and one goal in mind: to restore this beautiful trail. After a long yet gorgeous 11-mile hike, we reached Thousand Island Lake and the damage was blatantly clear. A river had torn through a section of trail causing hikers and horses to trek over small unstable rocks or risk falling in the deep mud. A few feet away was a ditch at least four feet deep next to a rock and the hillside. This problem was fine for hikers but horses and pack mules could not fit through the gap. We surveyed the damage then went to our campsite. The very first thing I noticed was the stunning view, and for a moment my breath was taken away. Our campsite was on the top of a hill looking over the island-scattered lake with Banner Peak staggering in the background. This was probably been the most beautiful landscape I had seen a long time. The previous one was at the peak of Mt. Whitney. We set up camp and Inyo Wilderness Ranger Deb Bayle met us and told us that the stock was bypassing the trail through the meadow. At this point we all knew that we needed to fix this trail before it got any worse.

After the first night we left for the damaged areas and began to discuss on what to do. I was designated to the trail at the river. Excited to make a difference I moved so quickly that one of the guys told me to slow down because we had five days to finish. We had plenty of work to do and it started with clearing the muddy area full of large rocks and defining what was needed to make the walkway. Clearing the rocks was the hardest challenge especially a massive boulder right in the center. After a while fiddling around with rock bars and shovels we somehow managed to create a clear section of river. From then on it was all about digging and placing new rock then smashing in shale to create the actual path. After we finished the river trail the ditch section of trail was also done and it looked fantastic. Finally after a long weak of work we all felt an extreme sense of accomplishment as we all got our day off.

As I hiked to a twin lake over a ridge, hikers thanked me for being such a help to the environment and an older couple was impressed that such a young boy was caring for nature. I thanked them and continued hiking on with not only a sense of personal accomplishment but also feeling that I helped out others as well. After, it was time to head home so we packed up and set off. Back at home in the nicest shower I've ever had, remembering the week put a smile on my face.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Alek is 16 years old and a senior at Lee Vining High school. He started going to Lee Vining junior year after the Eastern Sierra Academy was shut down. His favorite subjects are math and science but he also like English. In school he maintain a 4.0-4.3 GPA as well as juggles sports and a social life. He lives in Mammoth Lakes and loves to do everything that involves the outdoors, from backcountry skiing to hiking to mountain biking. His future plans right now are to attend four-year college to major in architecture then see if he wants to get a masters after. The four colleges he is looking at right now are, Cornell, McGill, Waterloo, and Cal Poly. Hopefully by next year he shall be attending one of these. After college the possibilities are endless so he will wait till the time comes to decide. In the meantime he's going to make the most of what he has.

A Dip in Long Lake is all it Takes

By Natalie Gonzalez

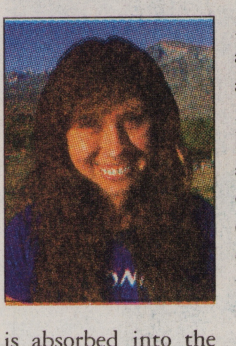
Life changing. Undeniably life changing.

A few moments of hesitation pass. I take in the spectacle before me. A glistening, deep blue lake greets my eyes. Enveloped in majestic mountains and a cloudless summer sky, this surreal body of water is the closest thing to godliness.

My eagerness to be a part of it is overwhelming. I cautiously sink my right foot into the clear water and I am immediately stung by the frigid temperature. The sweat on my forehead and heat encapsulating the rest of my body provide a stark contrast to the icy ripples that are nibbling at my foot. More moments of hesitation. I am torn by my desire to jump in the water and surround myself in the heavenly scene before me and by my other desire to be a bystander, warm and protected from the glacial temperature of the lake. Another step. Both feet in the water, both feet losing connection to my upper half, which is still enjoying the wave of heat and cringing away from the icy-cold water down below.

The decision is made. Making use of my mental strength, I take a couple more steps and am soon waist deep in the water. I can feel the aversion of the rest of my body as I continue to tread in further. The adrenaline pumping in my veins has quickened my heartbeat. I smile in enjoyment at this invigorating feeling.

I have to take the plunge. To completely immerse myself in one of the many incredible backdrops the Eastern Sierra has to offer. To live it up and experience only this moment..



Three.....

two....

one.

My entire body is absorbed into the freezing water, and my brain takes a little vacation. Worries, thoughts, expectations, all of them disappear. It's just me, the water, and an eye-opening feeling of liberation. I surface for a breath and absorb this new feeling of weightlessness, of freedom. I allow the lake to engulf me with its gelid temperature again.

Giddy with energy, and partially numb from the temperature, I swim away from the edge of the lake. Floating on my back, I look up at the clear-cut skyline created by the breathtaking mountains. The cold water dances along the edges of my face. I am care-free.

The water has served an unexpected purpose: it has lifted me from the world of superficiality and has left me to become adrift into an ethereal world, only best described as heaven on earth. Everything loses importance as I continue to effortlessly whirl around against the scenery of the shimmering lake and the snow-scattered mountains. Suddenly, the realization hits me of how immense the world and the universe really are. As a result, all concerns become trivial and insignificant. I am a microscopic dot in this grand scheme of things. This sheer beauty that has been here for centuries, and hopefully for many more centuries to come, all have me in a daze. My own time on earth is fleeting compared to these wonders. Considering this, time shouldn't be wasted by dwelling on troubles. Instead, it should be spent on living every second to the fullest.

I feel a sense of unexpected rejuvenation. Although I've always considered myself to be a genuinely happy person, in that instant I found the definition of true, unobstructed happiness. I had forgotten all my worries in the world and had found peace within nature's miraculous ways.

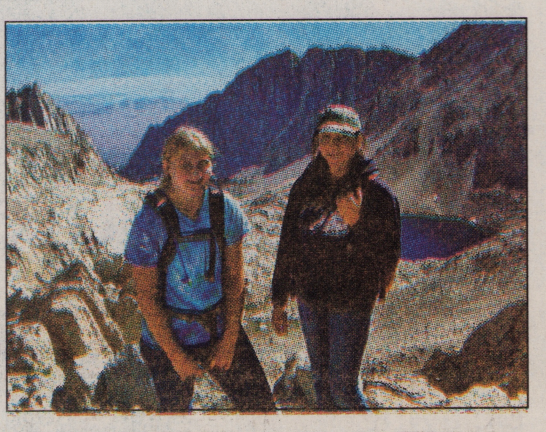
I can put all gratitude towards Long Lake in the Bishop Creek Canyon, one of the many marvels that can be found in the Eastern Sierra beauty. This moment blessed me with detachment from petty distresses and gave me an absolute appreciation for the area I am proud to call my home.

So I thank the Eastern Sierra wholeheartedly for allowing me to take a dip in its icy waters, and to experience a transitory moment of enlightenment. I know there will be more to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Natalie is a senior at Bishop High School. She loves the Eastern Sierra and all of the wonderful recreation it offers.

Where I Belong

By Jamey Wilcher



The author (r) and her best friend near the top of Mt. Whitney. Photo courtesy Chris Costello, Sr.

Once in a long while, a wave of certainty crashes over me that everything is right in my world, and I am exactly where I am meant to be …

The slow, rhythmic impact of my footsteps in the dirt dominates all sensation in my body. My eyes register only enough detail in the dim light to keep my feet from tripping over the scattered stones in my path; the glow generated by my headlamp seems to almost defy its own purpose by blinding me to everything outside its small circle of illumination. The air on my face is cold, but still, and after a while the temperature fades to insignificance as hiking warms my muscles. I shift the weight of my pack to a new place on my shoulders, and continue to follow the heels in front of me. My earbuds block out the sound of my breathing and the crunch of my best friend's footsteps behind me, but I do not even notice the music they are playing until a silence between songs lasts too long. Then something changes.

Drumbeats begin to accompany my feet as they hit the ground, seeming to stand in for what I would hear with each step, had I been able to hear anything outside my own head. High notes coaxed from the keys of a piano shine from each new rock my headlamp illuminates. Then I notice the lyrics; they belong to a song I hardly ever listen to.

"Stop your resistance,
This is where you belong…" *

Without even a moment of thought, I know the words of the song are true. I look up for the first time in half an hour, and find high cliffs and the ghostly silhouettes of pine trees all around me. The world is grey, suspended in that strange time between the dead of night and sunrise, when only the brightest stars retain the power to shine. I take a deep breath, savoring the clean, fresh air in my lungs, and smile. Yes, this is where I belong.

There, as I ascended the long trail out of Whitney Portal at five in the morning, I recognized that feeling for the first time. And, after looking back on my life, I realize that I've experienced such an undeniable sense of rightness just once since then: last fall, as I ran with Bishop High's cross-country team up towards Morgan Pass.

Icy high-altitude air burned in my lungs as I ran, and my eyes watered and vision blurred from cold and exertion. I looked up to find the rest of the team, and was instead stunned by the breathtaking landscape that met my eyes. Thin trees with pale bark that intensified their fiery fall colors slowly approached me, and at their base rested an icily blue-grey mountain lake, whose waters managed to look oddly lifeless despite the greenery that surrounded them. A sudden appreciation for the part of myself that thrives in beautiful places crashed over me. For a moment, it took away the pain of cold and exhaustion, and left me with a feeling almost inexpressible with words – at once beautiful, full of certainty, peaceful, and joyous in the knowledge that I've found my place in the world. That place is outside in the mountains, where my spirit can expand to fill every precious space left untouched by human hands.

* *The Summer Obsession. "Where You Belong." This Is Where You Belong. Virgin Records. Aug. 29, 2006.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: A little more than seventeen years ago, I was born in Bishop, Calif., and have been lucky enough to live in the Owens Valley for my entire life. I attended Round Valley Joint Elementary School from preschool to eighth grade, and am now beginning my senior year at Bishop High School. I have always loved the outdoors, and during my years in high school I've been exposed to more opportunities than ever before to exercise that passion, doing everything from running to hiking, skiing, fishing, camping, and floating the river with friends on a lazy summer day. Those priceless memories have been the most important source of fuel for my hopes of a future in environmental law, where I will one day work to protect everything I was so blessed to be able to experience growing up.

Heartbeat: The Story of Knowledge

By Sydney Velasquez

There aren't enough words in the world to completely grasp the concept of life. Even if that description was two pages long. But in my life I have come to see many things that would do so for me, and what makes it even better is I did so at a young age! Powwow dancing has given this to me, though, for what it gives it doth take.

As we are all taught, we have to work our way to a greater achievement, but for some the greater achievement lies underneath the feet of the rich, but on the top shelf for others. Here is how I came to find my top shelf reachable but my achievements not ending up under my feet.

Every year my grandmother and aunt would travel to powwows all over. It wasn't till I was about six that I knew why. The first thing my aunt did was take me to a bear dance, where many Native American people came from all over to heal their wounds; she told me "if you want to dance, you must be pure at heart and willing in the soul." So I went and did as she said, and later I learned how to dance and made my first regalia, but it wasn't till my very first powwow that I really understood what she meant.

Every year, Bishop, Calif. holds a powwow in the month of September, and every year, I dance. The first time I danced I felt so tired and weak I couldn't move the next day! My aunt just laughed and told me, "You just have to listen to move." So I did, and the next time I went out there, it didn't hurt at all. I never huffed, I never puffed, and I didn't feel weak either. The beat of the drums spoke to me as if I was the only one out there dancing. The drums beats told me how to move, they told me the grass was soft and the air was clean, all I had to do was see. The drums taught me of sorrow and how it builds a person at heart, they spoke to me about joy and how it loves to play. I saw everything as if we were all one; which we are. The drums told me when to stop, because we can never know everything at once, but when I stopped, nothing looked the same. I saw the world as if through another's eyes; I questioned how I would hurt someone if I did this or said that. I learned that joy will only come if you learn to overcome the sorrow. I strived to succeed, to share my knowledge, to show what I know, to learn what I don't.

Now here I am, teaching you that no matter how much knowledge you accumulate, you will never learn anything until you come to an understanding with yourself and with others. Happiness is the true key to wealth. The drum fueled my heart and taught me to learn; now I must fuel the culture so that the drum can teach others to learn.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: My name is Sydney Velasquez and I am heading into my senior year at Big Pine High School. After I graduate from Big Pine High, I plan to attend a junior college to get my generals done before I transfer to a university where I plan to major in Writing and Language Arts. My favorite poet is E.E. Cummings and I enjoy a little bit of William Shakespeare too. I am a proud alumna of the 2011 Girls State session for Big Pine. I hope you enjoyed my story and have a great day.

Untitled

By Amy Friedrichsen

My breath caught as I gazed over the rugged mountain terrain, across the lakes spilling onto the land, and past the blooming trees and flowers. This was my first time hiking up beautiful Bishop Pass and the stunning features of nature astounded my mind. Everything I thought I knew and had experienced dissipated as a new surreal realm overtook me.

I put on my best pair of white hiking shoes, my newly washed shorts and tank top, and my cute hat I had recently purchased. My makeup was perfectly drawn onto my face, a mop of curly brown hair piled on top of my head. To me, this was a body prepared for a hike. Little did I know nothing about appearance or attire even comes close to mattering once the outdoor world envelopes you. The hiking shoes were quickly soiled, clothes stained with dirt and grass, all traces of mascara washed away from perspiration. What surprised me most though was not the fact that I resembled a grungy hobo, but that I liked it, embraced this new me. Something was shifting inside my being.

The sun rested in the pinnacle of the sky and a slight breeze tussled the few loose strands of hair that had fallen out of my once neat, tight bun. And then a wave of peace and joy splashed on me and I couldn't help but stand still and breath in deeply this tranquil air. What a liberating breath that was! My lungs expanded,

oxygen seeped into my brain, and the old me was exhaled, never to return. Who was left? A girl with new perception and gratitude, filled with the realization that a simpler life is out there. It now seems so trivial investing in material objects, giving them value and meaning in life when little is to be gained from owning this purse or that pair of shoes.

There is one view in particular that is stamped in my memory. My feet were approaching mile 4, and exhaustion threatened to creep into my laboring body. The blood was pumping through my veins, the breath in my lungs struggling to bring relief to the burn in my chest. Despite the protest from my aching muscles though, I continued ascending the winding trail, deeper and deeper into the hidden wonders of the Eastern Sierra. This choice proved to be one of the most rewarding that I have ever made. For over the last hill and around the last corner, the most beatific scene awaited my eyes. Let me attempt to paint the landscape that sat before me: the bluest lake my eyes have ever beheld, rich in color and layered with deep blue to sage green to a light turquoise. The still water caressed over a plethora of rocks forming a flowing waterfall. Flowers lay hidden here and there and, simply, it was an out of body experience.

After filling my empty bottle with the pure, icy water rushing from the lake, I began the descent towards Bishop and away from this concealed paradise. A part of me desired nothing more than to remain in the hills of Bishop Pass, to maybe build a tree house and live forever beside those living waters. But of course that dream wasn't realistic, so I reluctantly trudged back to my awaiting car.

A girl concerned with clothes and appearance began a hike thinking it would tone her thighs and fill the days requirement for exercise. Little did she know she would emerge as a changed individual whose soul was awakened to the beauty that life truly beholds.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Amy is currently a senior at Bishop Union High School living each day as it comes with joy and excitement.

Andrew A. Forbes – Photographs of the Owens Valley Paiute

JON BOSAK
Photography Editor

THIS article presents 16 previously unpublished[1] photographs of the Owens Valley Paiute, taken between 1903 and 1916, together with some comments on the images and the man who made them. Their publication at this time is the result of a communication from William Marvin Mason, Curator of History at the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History and a Contributing Editor to the *Journal*, which informed us of the existence of an extensive collection of photographs, including some of California Indians, taken by A. A. Forbes of Bishop, California. With rare exceptions, the photographs in this collection have never been published.

The photographs which appear here comprise a representative sample of Forbes' work among the Owens Valley Paiute and were assembled for this purpose by Mr. Mason. We have chosen to reproduce them, not to illustrate some substantive article analyzing an aspect of Paiute culture, but simply to show some pictures of the Paiutes themselves that have not been seen before, and to remind ourselves, perhaps, of the human reality underlying the historical discourse, to see in a few detailed glimpses how photographs can convey the spirit of an actual time and place as fragmentary mirrors of the past.

For photographs such as these are not only *about* a time and place, they are *of* it; in this sense, they are artifacts themselves, as all photographs are, mappings of reality onto itself by our contrivance. By their nature they can tell us about the way these people looked and lived with far more certainty than a verbal description that is partly a reconstruction in retrospect, just as a fossil dinosaur track—that is, a point-for-point mapping of the bottom of the foot onto the surface of the mud—tells us more certainly the shape of the foot than any amount of logical reconstruction. Information of this sort is fragmentary but certain. Barring purposeful distortion on the part of the photographer, pictures such as these are primary sources for any study of the people they represent, fossil reflections, as it were, of the people themselves.

Little is known about the man who crafted these images beyond the facts set forth below. Excepting a few stray deductions based on the *Illustrated Catalogue of Forbes Studio, Bishop, Inyo County, California*, published about 1912 to 1914 and presently in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum, this information was assembled almost entirely from a short biography originally written by Forbes' wife and added to later by various members of the family. This was supplied by his son, J. McLaren Forbes of Reno, Nevada. Following the biography is a brief commentary on the pictures.

BIOGRAPHY OF ANDREW FORBES

Andrew Alexander Forbes (his friends called him "Andy") was born April 21, 1862 in Ottowa Township, Waukesha County, Wisconsin, the son of James McLaren Forbes and Lucinda Parmelia Sanders and the fifth of eight children. The Forbes family made a trip from Wisconsin to California via the Isthmus of Panama in 1867, then returned to the Midwest in 1868 to settle near Sioux City, Iowa. In 1878, they moved to Bazine, Ness County, Kansas. Here they bought range land and did well as stockmen until the grasshopper hordes and big blizzards of 1888 and 1890 destroyed the feed and livestock. Except for one son, John, who owned a store in Bazine, the family moved to southern California in 1890, first settling near Wildomar, in Riverside County, and then in Santa Ana.

Sometime during the decade between 1878 and 1888, while helping his family as a cowboy on the range, Andrew Forbes took up photography. Little is known of his life during this time or how he attained his photographic training. We do know that he and one of his brothers were present at the opening of the "Cherokee Strip" in Oklahoma, and that he took a series of reportedly excellent photographs of the "Opening Run" when, on April 22, 1889, some 20,000 homesteaders crossed the border of what was then "Indian Territory" in a wild dash for free land. After he had taken the pictures, Andrew and his brother loaded the equipment in their wagon and joined the run.

The photographs of the "Opening Run," now at the University of Oklahoma, mark a turning point in Forbes' career. For the rest of his life, though his cowboy skills never left him, he made his living from photography.

For several years, beginning about 1890, Forbes worked as an itinerant photographer, traveling from town to town by team and wagon. As he wandered slowly westward—

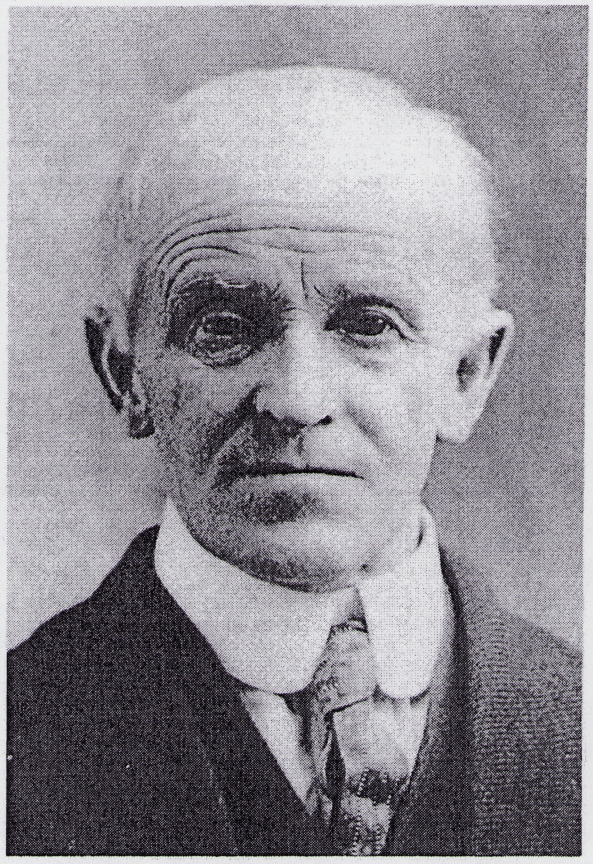


Fig. 1. Andrew Alexander Forbes. This portrait was apparently taken by Forbes himself, using a bulb release. Photograph courtesy of J. McLaren Forbes.

from Oklahoma to Dodge City and then up and down the eastern slope of the Rockies—he stopped in small towns and took pictures of the local town and Chamber of Commerce groups, the schools and schoolchildren, and all "points of interest" until he had accumulated enough money to move on. Listed in his Bishop studio catalogue are pictures of cowboys—roping steers, branding horses, attending a funeral—and of cattle and buffalo herds which can be attributed to this period.

In 1898, Forbes arrived in California, having traveled across New Mexico and Arizona. Over the years, he had gathered a remarkable collection of Indian photographs, taken mainly in Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico, and in

northern Arizona. According to the studio catalogue, these include representatives of the Cheyenne, Apache, Navajo, "Moqui" (Hopi), "Pueblo," and Supai.

For a few years, Forbes made his headquarters with his parents and sisters in Santa Ana, California. During this time, he took pictures throughout southern California and north at least to Hollister and the San Joaquin Valley. His subjects included communities and landscapes, Death Valley, the New Idria mercury mine, and fur trappers, among others.

About 1902—certainly after 1900 and before 1904—Forbes established a studio in Bishop, California, in the then-verdant Owens Valley. It was while he owned and operated the "Forbes Studio" that he married Mary Rozette Prutzman, a young businesswoman, who soon took over the business details of the studio. They had one son, J. McLaren Forbes.

During the 14 years in which Forbes operated the studio, the Indians of the area regularly came to him to have their pictures taken. Because of the friendly relationships thus established, Forbes was able to take not only hundreds of studio portraits, but also photographs of the Indians in their encampments in the Owens Valley, Yosemite, and elsewhere. The photographs relating to the Owens Valley Paiute that are reproduced in this article were taken during this period. Besides the Paiute, other California Indians photographed by Forbes include representatives of the "Petrara," the Luiseño, and the "Yosemite" (Western Mono, Miwok, and/or Yokuts).

Occasional sidetrips from Bishop took Forbes to southern California, where he photographed the development of orange-growing communities, the missions, and the early industrial growth of the region, including the building of the Los Angeles Aqueduct. The financial mainstay of the studio, however, was the sale to tourists of Forbes' scenic views of the Owens Valley and the country around it, the Sierras, Mt. Whitney, Yosemite, and the San Joaquin Valley. Landscape photography was his "first love," and it was his passion for this form, together with his years of experience as a stockman, that enabled him to pack the bulky, delicate equipment of his day, on animals specially trained to carry it, across the roadless wilderness. There were times, when he came to the end of the horse trail, that he packed more than half his weight in photographic gear on his back in order to reach a vantage point for the exact view he wished to record.

Forbes closed the studio in 1916 for family health reasons and moved to southern California in search of a new location, but he never found another place suitable to the establishment of the kind of studio he had in Bishop. He died in 1921, a friendly and well-liked man remembered as an active member of the Odd Fellows Lodge and a participant in community and church groups and local plays.

COMMENTARY ON THE PHOTOGRAPHS

The anthropological significance of the Forbes photographs is obvious from an examination of those reproduced here, a small sample of the more than 1200 negatives of all types of subjects in the Forbes collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History. Their value to us rests primarily on three qualities: the subject matter (when it fits our field of inquiry), the high technical quality of the photographs themselves, and a certain "artlessness" in their manner of presentation.

The technical quality of the photographs, their sharpness and richness of tonality (much of which, unfortunately, is lost in a halftone reproduction), is due to several factors. First, the limited equipment of Forbes' day—large cameras, usually taking 8 x 10 inch negatives, and slow, color-blind glass plates—imposed a careful manner of working on anyone using them. And the limitations of these materials were all in the direction of unwieldiness and

Fig. 2. *Taking 150 mi. of Sierras From Summit White Mts.* The turntable upon which the panoramic Circuit camera rotated is visible between the camera and the tripod. This picture was probably taken by Mrs. Forbes, who often accompanied her husband on his summer pack trips. Photograph courtesy of J. McLaren Forbes.

difficulty of use, not lack of image quality. In that respect, the quality delivered by an 8 x 10 view camera and glass plates, properly used, has rarely been excelled by easier methods.

A second and equally important factor was Forbes' seriousness of purpose, as evident in his technique as it was in the doggedness with which he pursued some of his scenic subjects. Furthermore, he was interested in technique for its own sake; it is remembered that he experimented with all the photographic media at his disposal, even attempting aerial photography by suspending the camera from a series of large kites (J. McLaren Forbes, personal communication). His scenic panoramas were in themselves technical *tours de force*, since the elongated panoramic format necessitated special techniques and a special camera, larger and heavier than even the 8 x 10 (see Fig. 2). One view taken with this "Circuit" camera pictured, according to the studio catalogue, 250 miles of the Sierra Nevadas in 13 sections; the print, when assembled, measured 10 inches by 32 feet.

Of primary interest is the fact that the technical quality resulting from the combination of these factors carried over to his pictures of Indians, particularly to those of their encampments. For instance, several small objects which appear in Figs. 14-16 but are difficult to identify with the unaided eye are clearly revealed when a 10x magnifier is used in examining the original prints. Through the magnifier one can see the twining of the baskets, the weave of the cloth, the botanical details of the tules used to thatch the houses. It is a sad fact that much of the anthropological field photography done with today's vastly superior lenses and films is inferior to what Forbes was doing 70 years ago, deficient in the very quality, detail, that constitutes its reason for being—the more so since, after all, this subject matter was peripheral to Forbes' photographic interests and is central to our own.

Forbes was not unique, however, in his search for technical excellence. During the first part of this century, other talented photographers, both amateur and professional, devoted at least part of their work to pictur-

ing the Indians of the Southwest.[2] Probably the two best known examples are Edward S. Curtis of Seattle and Adam Clark Vroman of Pasadena, the former a professional photographer who made a massive compilation of exquisitely produced gravures of the Indians of North America the crowning achievement of his career,[3] the latter a bookseller and gifted amateur who was similarly inspired to record the Indians of the Southwest. While their styles differed considerably, both were markedly influenced by the romanticism and ideality, largely borrowed from academic painting, that shaped the vision of most of their photographic contemporaries. This tradition found expression in the selection of subjects, in their posing, and in the selection, arrangement, and treatment of backgrounds. Although both took photographs which attempted to show the Indians in their environment—and often succeeded in doing so artistically—it is clear that the surroundings were generally manipulated to fit the idea that the photographer had brought to the situation, and that if this idea could not be incorporated, then the situation was not of interest. As Vroman wrote in *Photo Era* Magazine in 1901:

> One trouble is lack of background. If you take the time to improvise one, the subject may change his mind and your time is wasted [Newhall *in* Mahood 1972:13].

The result of these tendencies was the production of very beautiful images which, however, often convey very little information. Forbes' work, by contrast, offers a more nearly "straight" record of the subjects pictured, judging from the prints which are reproduced in this article. Although his studio work is certainly reminiscent of styles borrowed from classical painting (Figs. 6-10), the photographs of Indian encampments (Figs. 14-16), while pleasingly composed, demonstrate an essential absence of the "artistic" drive to simplify the visual situation, to eliminate the "distracting details" of foreground and background that convey, to our eyes, information regarding habitat, acculturation, and native technology.

There are several reasons for this difference in style between Forbes and his contemporaries. Most obvious, of course, is the fact that to Curtis and Vroman the Indians were a project suffused with nobility, the last of a dying race, and, to Curtis at least, symbols of man in sacred relationship with nature, expressions of "a rich legacy deeply spiritual in essence," as one of his latter-day editors puts it (Brown 1972:7). To Forbes, on the other hand, the Indians were customers, neighbors, friends, and very much alive—people who would gather to sit and socialize on the edge of the boardwalk in front of his studio in Bishop. No less important, however, are the facts of Forbes' physical isolation from the artistic conventions of the cities and his untutored cowboy background, which combined to keep him relatively unrestricted by the photographic canons of the time.

The unmannered style of Forbes' photographs is actually closer to that of the Indian photographers of a generation before him, such as William S. Soule and John K. Hillers, than to that of his contemporaries. (Soule photographed the Kiowa, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Comanche, among others, at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, from 1869 to 1874. Hillers accompanied John Wesley Powell on his explorations down the Colorado River from 1871 to 1873 and took stereoscopic photographs of the Ute and Southern Paiute in Utah, Nevada, and Northern Arizona.) But even these straightforward pioneers were prone to ethnocentric aberrations of taste; Steward (1939:4), commenting on Hillers' work, prefaces his discussion with the following *caveat*:

> Caution . . . is necessary in interpreting the pictures. Not only are many of the Indians obviously posed in artificial stances, but art seems often to have outweighed realism in the selection of objects represented. Thus,

ing the Indians of the Southwest.[2] Probably the two best known examples are Edward S. Curtis of Seattle and Adam Clark Vroman of Pasadena, the former a professional photographer who made a massive compilation of exquisitely produced gravures of the Indians of North America the crowning achievement of his career,[3] the latter a bookseller and gifted amateur who was similarly inspired to record the Indians of the Southwest. While their styles differed considerably, both were markedly influenced by the romanticism and ideality, largely borrowed from academic painting, that shaped the vision of most of their photographic contemporaries. This tradition found expression in the selection of subjects, in their posing, and in the selection, arrangement, and treatment of backgrounds. Although both took photographs which attempted to show the Indians in their environment—and often succeeded in doing so artistically—it is clear that the surroundings were generally manipulated to fit the idea that the photographer had brought to the situation, and that if this idea could not be incorporated, then the situation was not of interest. As Vroman wrote in *Photo Era* Magazine in 1901:

> One trouble is lack of background. If you take the time to improvise one, the subject may change his mind and your time is wasted [Newhall *in* Mahood 1972:13].

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a woman in semidress may indicate Powells' and Hillers' idea of photographic art rather than actual use of garments. Poses with bows, baskets, and other objects may also misrepresent their actual use.

In fairness it should be said that none of the photographers discussed here used equipment suited to taking "candid" photographs, and that posing of some kind was dictated by the long exposures used to make the image. (The blurred form seen in Fig. 15 shows the effect of failing to pose the subject.)[4] Even so, there is no reason to suspect that Forbes arranged his Indian subjects in garments entirely inappropriate to the situation, as did Hillers, or as reconstructions of a partly imagined past, as did Curtis. Rather, like Soule (see Belous and Weinstein 1969), Forbes crafted the closest thing to a straight record of the situations he found away from his studio as was possible at the time; and, also like Soule, the studio portraits that form the bulk of his Indian work are comparatively honest, direct, and "artless" within the context of tightly conventionalized nineteenth-century photographic portraiture.

It is interesting to note in passing that, although Forbes' photographs might well have been judged artistically deficient by critics of his era—had they been aware of them—there is, nevertheless, art in many of these pictures when they are considered from a modern photographic viewpoint. How much of this was a product of conscious decision is an open question. In the picture of the Paiute school at Big Pine (Fig. 13), for instance, the arrangement of light and shade is such as to direct attention to the walls of the building, and particularly to the fence in the foreground, while throwing the figures of children and teacher into vague shadow. Whether this was a comment on the situation or an accident of light is something that must await further research into Forbes' life, work, and intentions.

For Andrew Forbes remains essentially an unknown. Biographical data are scarce, and references to Forbes in the photohistorical literature are nonexistent. His photographs have appeared in print perhaps three times in the 54 years since his death.[5] At least one of his photographs—a head-and-shoulders shot of Captain John (Fig. 3)—is in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution but is not credited to him.[6] And the photographs themselves, in the form of boxes of uncatalogued glass plates, are practically inaccessible at present. It is hoped that further research into this pioneer photographer of the Southwest will clear up some of the questions about him and make his photographs accessible to scholars and the public.

The captions to the photographs which follow have been composed throughout with reference to Steward's *Ethnography of the Owens Valley Paiute* (1933). The pictures illustrate many concepts offered by Steward in his ethnography and may serve, in a sense, as a photographic supplement to that work. They were not unknown to Steward, since he reproduced one Forbes photograph (showing the house of Fig. 15) in the ethnography (1933:Pl. 3c), and we may conclude that he used others in the course of its preparation.

The titles of photographs, when they appear in the captions below, are taken directly from the original plates or from the Forbes studio catalogue.

Riverside, California

Sierra Profile . . .

Mary Austin

Her words were
one with the mountain.

Mary Hunter Austin
Eastern California Museum photograph, copied by Tom Ross

by Candace Ross

Robert Frost has written "The land was ours before we were the lands." Mary Hunter Austin touched on many themes in her prose and poetry, but the outstanding imagery and expressive style of some of her finest works are based on her perceptions of the land of Inyo. She interpreted the Owens Valley and High Sierra and the beauty of her writing matched the land's beauty. Mary Austin was the land's; hers was the voice of the land. She could have joined in the Yokuts' song:

My words are tied in one
With the great mountains
With the great rocks
With the great trees,
In one with my body
And my heart

She came to Owens Valley in 1891 as the bride of Stafford Austin who was engaged in a project near Lone Pine trying to divert water from the Owens River and irrigate a large parcel of land for future homes. She was twenty-three years old. She and her husband lived in Lone Pine, then in Bishop where she taught at the Methodist Academy from 1895 to 1897, then once again in Lone Pine, before settling in Independence from 1898 to 1905. Independence during these years is described in Helen MacKnight Doyle's book, *Mary Austin: Woman of Genius*, as

". . . the little town that lies on the slope of Kearsarge, that regal peak that juts eastward from the Sierra Nevada mountains. There were three streets in the town and three hundred people lived in unattractive houses on those streets which petered out into the desert by dusty windbreaks and that ever constant fringe of tin cans that edges a desert town."

"The main building was the County Court House whose activities with that of sheep, cattle and mining interest, supported the hotel, three stores and two saloons that straggled along the main street. A willow banked stream flowed down to the town and small farms, at scattered intervals, reclaimed the desert along its course."

Please turn to page 24

"The great gray bulk of Williamson heaved up against the sun" is the way Mary Austin described this majestic Sierra Peak in her poem in Lost Borders. Photo by Tom Ross

Mary Austin's home in Independence on Market Street, built in 1900. The fireplace was made half of rock and half of seashells by Mary Austin. The house is not open to the public but is marked with a California Historical Marker. Photo by Tom Ross

Mary Austin continued from page 22

This was the community where she would build her home in 1900. She herself fashioned the fireplace, and fifty years later when a California Registered Historical Marker was placed at the site, the words about her home from the Preface to *The Land of Little Rain* would serve as the plaque's engraving:

> *"But if ever you come across the borders as far as the town that lies in a little hill dimple at the foot of Kearsarge, never leave it until you have knocked at the door of the brown house under the willow tree at the end of the village street, and there you will have such news of the land, of its trails and what is astir in them, as one lover of it can give to another."*

During these years, she gained literary fame writing for several magazines including The Overland Monthly, Cosmopolitan, The Atlantic, and Out West. *The Land of Little Rain* was published in 1903. After she left Inyo, other books would be published that were based on her time there, including, *Lost Borders, The Flock,* and *The Ford.*

Mary Austin wrote . . ."Man is not himself only . . . He is all that he sees; all that flows to him from a thousand sources . . . He is the land; the lift of its mountain lines, and the reach of its valleys . . ." She reached this pinnacle of oneness with nature in her poem in *Lost Borders* which is alive with the imagery of Inyo:

Let's have done with stranger faces, let's be quit of staring eyes,
Let's go back across Mojave where where the hills of Inyo rise.
There's a word we've lost between us we shall never hear again
In the mindless clang of engines where they bray the hearts of men.
Let's go seek it east of Kearsarge where the seven-mile shadows run,
From the great gray bulk of Williamson heaved up against the sun.
Let's go look for Hassayampa, with your arm across my shoulders,
Through the cannons of lost rivers by the bone-white bleaching bowlders.
Through the scented glooming hollows where the gray wolf shadows flee —
Where from Sur to Ubhebe only you and I shall be;
And the word — I cannot name it, but we'll learn its sweetest use
In the moonlit sandy reaches when the desert wind is loose.
There's a little creek in Inyo, singing by beyond the town,
Through the pink wild-almond tangle and the birches slim and brown,
Where all night we'll watch the star beams in the shallow, open rills,
And the hot, bright moons of August skulking low along the hills;
And the word will wake in Inyo — never printed in a page —
With the wind that wakes the morning on a thousand miles of sage.

She wrote about her theory of the "landscape line;" words that are matched to the environment. One feels the majesty of the mountains in the cadence of her lines from *The Land of Little Rain* which can be written in lines like free verse:

"All streets of the mountains lead to the citadel;
Steep or slow they go up to the core of the hills . . .
You will find it forsaken of most things
But beauty, and madness and death and God . . .
You get the saw-tooth effect from a distance,
But the nearby granite bulk glitters with
The terrible keen polish of old glacial ages.
I say terrible; so it seems.
When those glossy domes swim into the alpenglow
Wet after rain,
You conceive how long and imperturbable
Are the purposes of God."
. . . how distinct is the Sierra Nevada.
A very Bonaparte of mountains,
New-born and lording it over the ancient ranges . . ."

Her words convey the immensity and wildness of the High Sierra, and this is what she has been acclaimed for, her interpretation of the land in outline and meaning, the ways of nature and its forces. Speaking of her own writing, she said, "There is really nothing to tell. I have just looked nothing more . . . by and by I got to know when and where looking was most worthwhile. Then I got so full of looking that I had to write to get rid of some of it and make room for more." Her theory of the American Rhythm in poetry, well-illustrated by her own passage on the Streets of the Mountains, owes its cadences to the geographical location where it was envisioned. The Land of Little Rain fired her imagination and inspired her, and the land is immortalized in her works. She spoke of Owens Valley in this passage from *The Flock*:

> *"That desert fenced portion between Mojave and Sherwin Hill, where lies a big, wild country, full of laughing water with pines marching up alongside them, circling the grassy colored lakes, full of noble windy slopes and high grassy valleys barred by the straight shadows of new mountains. All the cliffs of that country have fresh edges, all the light that cuts between them from the westering sun lies yellowy along the sod. All the winds of its open spaces smell of sage, and all its young rivers are swift. They begin thin and crystalline from under the forty-foot drifts, grow thick and brown in the hot leaps of early summer, run clear with full throaty laughter in mid-season, froth and cloud to quick, far-off rains, fall off to low and golden and mottled rills before the first of the snows"*

Like Thoreau and Muir before her, her books and poetry such as *The Land of Little Rain, Lost Borders, The Flock* and *Land of Journeys Ending* portray the oneness of man with nature and the reader feels the wonders of nature as if he himself had gone to

continued on page 25

Mary Austin *continued from page 24*

these places. Mary Austin wrote thirty-five books and hundreds of short stories.

Even after she left Independence in 1905, disillusioned about the future of the Owens River Valley because of the Los Angeles aqueduct project, knowing the valley would be irrevocably changed, she still thought of Inyo, and the country of the "dwelling place of a Great Spirit" figured in her mystic view of her own death:

> *"I was so convinced of going on after it, that I thought to pass through the experience called dying might prove interesting, and even advantageous. As near as I could guess from predilection, I should go on as the guardian spirit of a little forest of silver firs in an easterly lap of the Sierras where in January the drifts are forty feet deep and in June the air is odorous and hot with the breath of saxifrage and penstemon. There I should shake out the sapling firs from the slogging snows, keep the deer from trampling the white lupins along the creek, and manifest as a blue shaft of light in the green and windy gloom."*

Mary Austin died in Santa Fe on August 13, 1934 at the age of sixty-six years. She left her mark on the country of Inyo and though she left it, many of her later works were drawn upon it. She captured the feeling of nature she spoke of, "beauty that takes the breath like pain." The graphic descriptions of Inyo in her works bring the country alive to her readers.

As time brings more and more mechanized and materialistic processes to society, it is and will continue to be refreshing to read the works of a person for whom the landscape was part of her innermost being, who felt nature close to her heart and who had the gift to interpret the land in her writings. Those who know Inyo intimately can only feel with her that " there is no sort of experience that works so constantly and subtly upon man as his regional environment."

A thunderstorm happened above Bishop in 1916.This picture was taken on Main Street facing south.

Photo by A.A. Forbes, Laws Museum

Mary Austin and Andrew Forbes

Poetry, Photography, and the Eastern Sierra

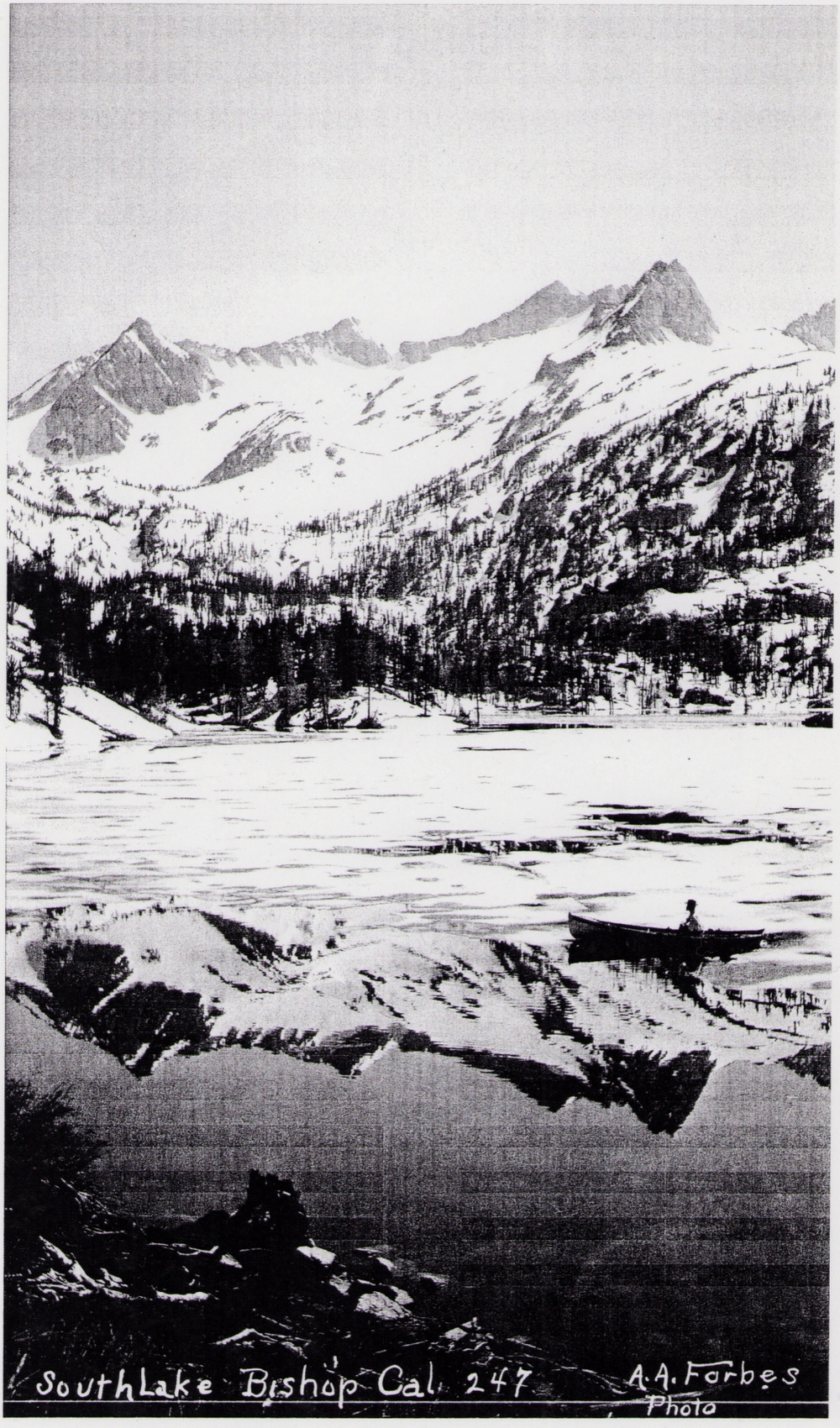
By Karen S. Langlois

"The origin of mountain streams is like the origin of tears, patent to the understanding but mysterious to the sense," Mary Austin wrote of the snow-fed rivers that cascaded down the sheer gorges of the Eastern Sierra. The haunting beauty of the pristine streams and dramatic crests "blotched dark with pines and white with snow" provided the aesthetic inspiration for the poetry she composed while living in the shadow of the mountains. The compelling landscape also drew the photographer Andrew Forbes to the area. He recorded many exceptional scenes in a stunning collection of photographic views taken after his arrival at the turn of the century. From 1902 to 1906, the lives of Austin and Forbes overlapped in the Owens Valley; each documented the natural beauty of the Eastern Sierra south of Yosemite as they pursued their art.[1]

Mary Hunter Austin (1868–1934) is best known today for her 1903 classic, *The Land of Little Rain*, story sketches describing and interpreting the Eastern Sierra region. On the basis of this book and other nature writing, she is often ranked with Henry David Thoreau and John Muir as a naturalist. In all, she authored some thirty books and wrote in a wide variety of forms, including poems, plays, novels, short stories, articles, and reviews. Many of her most important works are currently in print, but much of the poetry written during the period when she lived in the Owens Valley is little known. This essay adds to the published record—set down in Austin's autobiography, *Earth Horizon*, and in subsequent biographies—and includes a number of her previously unpublished poems. It is the first attempt to integrate some of the poems written during this time with the biographical information.[2]

The unique landscape of the Eastern Sierra inspired the artistic imaginations of the poet Mary Austin and the photographer Andrew Forbes. Forbes photographed the jagged peaks and ridges overlooking South Lake, set in a glacial basin southwest of Bishop at an altitude of 9,755 feet. The lake of the Eastern Sierra, Austin wrote, "is the eye of the mountain, jade green, placid, unwinking, also unfathomable . . ."

Seaver Center for Western History Research, Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History


South Lake Bishop Cal. 247
A.A. Forbes
Photo

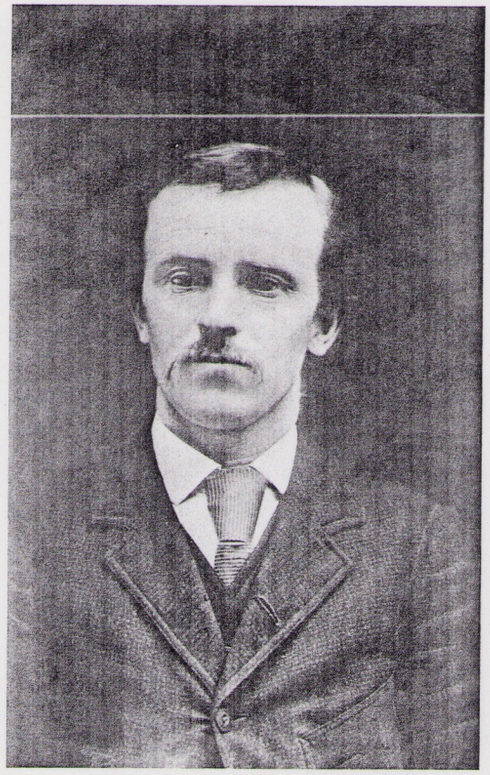
Andrew Alexander Forbes (1862–1921) is remembered for his dramatic photographs of the fourth Oklahoma land run in September 1893, when 100,000 homesteaders dashed for free land in the "Cherokee Strip." A collection of his western images includes hundreds of panoramic views, photographs, and postcards made during his years in the Eastern Sierra, a small percentage of which have ever been published. To date, there is somewhat limited biographical data available on Forbes. This study is the first published essay integrating some of Forbes' photographs taken between 1902 and 1916 with the published details of his life.[3]

In addition to their artistic merit, Forbes' photographs and Austin's poems are significant in their focus on the Eastern Sierra. In pursuing their creative interests and livelihoods, Forbes and Austin increased public awareness for this unique landscape and its inhabitants. Forbes' photographs were sold to local residents, businesses, and tourists, while Austin, who as a teacher in the Owens Valley composed nature poetry "to have something for my pupils about the land they lived in,"[4] sold her verse to regional magazines such as *The Land of Sunshine* (renamed *Out West* in 1902) and to eastern periodicals.

Inspired by the dramatic beauty of the Eastern Sierra, Austin and Forbes made lasting contributions to the cultural history of California and the West. Paired together, their word pictures and photographic images offer a modern audience the opportunity to experience creative expressions linked by historical period, subject matter, and artistic sensibility.

THE LURE OF THE VALLEY

Both Austin and Forbes were transplanted Midwesterners to the Owens Valley, an arid ranching valley in eastern California sided by two mountain ranges. The Eastern Sierra skyline—great blocks of gray with opal shadows—lies to the west, dominated by the towering 14,496-foot summit of Mount Whitney. The stark White-Inyo Mountains rise to the east. At the foot of Mount Whitney are the Alabama Hills, rust-brown outcrops of weathered granite. Owens Lake, once a hundred square miles in size, lay in the 1890s "like a vast lidless eye" in the desert basin.[5] Eighty miles east is Death Valley, 282 feet below sea level. The hundred-mile-long Owens Valley runs between the crest of the highest mountain in the contiguous United States and the stark, desert desolation of the lowest elevation.



Andrew Alexander Forbes, ca. 1892. *Ten years after this portrait was made, Forbes moved to Bishop, where he set up his photography studio. As the primary photographer of the Owens Valley from 1902 to 1916, Forbes documented the valley's transformation from frontier to community.*

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The explorer General John Charles Frémont named the Owens Valley, and its river and lake, for Richard Owens, with whom he crossed the Sierra in 1845 during an expedition in the Sierra Nevada. During the 1860s, settlers arrived in the valley to establish farms and ranches along

the Owens River. Mining camps soon dotted the Eastern Sierra, operated by miners who were lured to the mountain regions by the discovery of gold in 1857. In 1861, cattlemen first grazed their cattle in the valley before driving the herds through the Sierra. After an Indian uprising, U.S. soldiers arrived to provide protection for the settlers and prospectors. The troops built Camp Independence on Oak Creek in 1862. Four years later, Independence, the location of the valley's first homestead, became the seat of the newly organized Inyo County.[6]

Forbes was in his late thirties when he made his way to the Owens Valley, documenting his long, winding route through his camera lens. He was born in Ottawa, Wisconsin, on April 21, 1862, one of eight children, to James McLaren Forbes, of Scotland, and Lucinda Parmelia Sanders Forbes, of New York.[7] In 1867 the Forbes family traveled from Wisconsin to California via the Isthmus of Panama, returning to the Midwest the following year and settling near Sioux City, Iowa. In 1878 they relocated to Bazine, Kansas, where they prospered as cattle ranchers until a grasshopper plague destroyed the feed and a blizzard smothered the cattle in gullies of drifting snow. They came to southern California in 1890, first settling in Riverside County and then in Santa Ana in Orange County.

Forbes developed an interest in photography during the late 1870s or early 1880s while he was working on his family's cattle ranch; a relative observed that he inherited his artistic talent from his mother. He began his professional career in the late 1880s as an itinerant photographer, working the western territories with other skilled cameramen such as William Prettyman, George B. Cornish, and Thomas Croft; he may have learned his trade from one of them. The limited equipment of his day was the large

Forbes began traveling through Texas and Oklahoma in the late 1880s, photographing cowboys on the range and the land runs of the Oklahoma Territory. His wagon served as his photography studio—a self-contained place for his camera, glass-plate negatives, chemicals, paper, and card stock.

WESTERN HISTORY COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA LIBRARY

Mary Hunter Austin, ca. 1906. *A literary pioneer in her time, Austin drew on her observations of life in the Owens Valley to write prose and poetry that reflected her interests in multiculturalism, environmental preservation, and diversity of the landscape—issues that resonate with her readers a century later.*

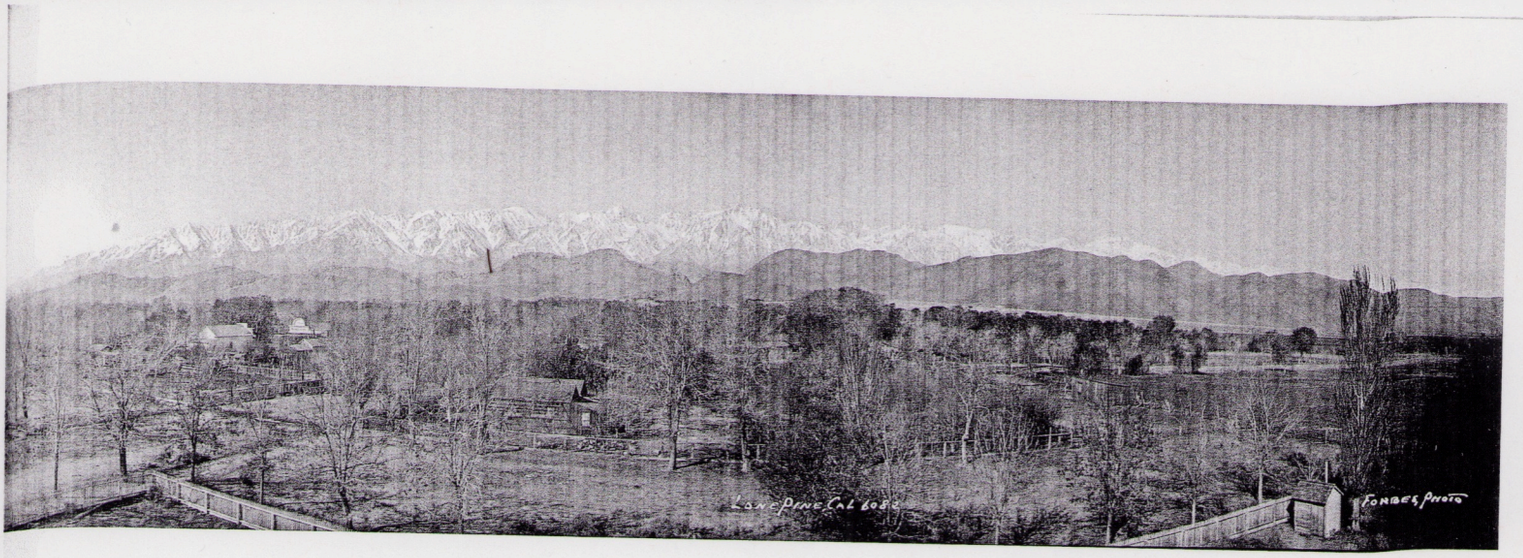
COUNTY OF INYO, EASTERN CALIFORNIA MUSEUM

format camera, which was cumbersome to use but produced high-quality prints using 8 x 10 inch negatives on color-blind plates. As an itinerant photographer, Forbes obtained bed and board in ranch bunkhouses and traveled by buckboard across rough terrain, sometimes going by horse or mule to isolated locations. He traveled to Dodge City, Kansas, and Stillwater, Oklahoma, capturing images of railroad construction workers, settlers beside their sod houses, and teachers and Indian children at a mission school. He took pictures of buffalo herds and cattle roundups and created memorable images of weathered cowboys in the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles roping their saddle horses, branding steer, and gathering around a chuck wagon. Isolated cowhands paid him fifty cents to a dollar for a souvenir picture.[8]

Traveling through the Southwest, Forbes photographed Native Americans in Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico, and in northern Arizona. He then worked his way along the eastern Rocky Mountains, arriving in the late 1890s at Santa Ana, where he joined his parents and sister. During his four-year stay in southern California, he produced images of communities, farms, and missions. He also traveled north to photograph Death Valley and the Eastern Sierra. In 1902, he settled in the town of Bishop.

Austin was a young wife in her mid-twenties when she arrived in the Owens Valley. Born on September 9, 1868, in Carlinville, Illinois, she was the third of four children. Her father, George Hunter, a Civil War veteran, was from England; her mother, Susanna Savilla Graham Hunter, was from Illinois. Austin graduated from Blackburn College in Carlinville, where she studied science. After her father's death, she came West in 1888 with her mother and brothers to homestead in California. Arriving in Los Angeles by train, they traveled one hundred miles by buckboard and horseback across Tejon Pass to settle in Kern County. Their tiny one-room cabin, surrounded by knee-high sagebrush, was a two-day wagon ride from Bakersfield, the main source of supplies. A severe drought soon undermined their homesteading venture.

Discouraged by the turn of events, Austin found employment as a teacher at a dairy ranch school in Mountain View in Kern County. There she met Stafford Wallace Austin, a graduate of the University of California and an aspiring viticulturalist, whom she married in 1891. After a failed attempt at fruit farming, the Austins settled in Bakersfield, where Wallace obtained employment supervising the construction of an irrigation ditch. The following year, when his brother Frank offered him a job managing an irrigation site in the Owens Valley, they moved to Lone Pine in the Eastern Sierra.



Forbes photographed often in and around the town of Lone Pine, where Mary Austin first arrived in 1892 and developed her fascination with the stark, high Sierra desert and the mountain regions of the Owens Valley. In her autobiography, Earth Horizon, *Austin described Lone Pine, noting "the strange wild beauty of the scene" with Mount Whitney "towering" in the distance.*

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From childhood, when she read the work of Byron, Keats, and Shelley in her father's book-lined study, Austin nurtured a lifelong interest in poetry. She began to write poems as a college student in the 1880s. She published some of her verse in her college literary magazine, the *Blackburnian*, and was elected "Class Poet." During their courtship Wallace Austin read poetry to her, a genteel custom of the period; on a trip to San Francisco after their marriage, she sought out the California poet Ina Coolbrith, who gave her advice and encouragement.[9]

"THIS LONG BROWN LAND"

When Austin first arrived in the Owens Valley in the spring of 1892, the tiny town of Lone Pine lay in a valley dotted with homesteads. Both the town and the creek that ran through it were named for a lone Jeffrey pine, later washed away in a flood. The first cabin was built beside the creek in 1861. West of town stood Lone Pine Mountain, "the vast ghost-gray bulk of Opopago"—"The Weeper"[10]—as it was known to the Paiute Indians. The Paiutes were the first to divert water from the Owens River into ditches. Now ranchers and farmers needed water for their cattle and crops, and Wallace joined his brother Frank's project to irrigate the arid soil. But the scheme failed due to a lack of capital, a fate common to private irrigation ventures. Unable to pay their bills, the Austins were evicted from their residence at the Lone Pine Hotel and moved to a boardinghouse on the outskirts of town. Their daughter, Ruth, was born the following October.

The Austins spent the winter and spring of 1893 at George's Creek, a few miles north of Lone Pine, where Wallace obtained a teaching position and filed a homesteading claim. They lived in a one-room cabin on a mesa beside the nearby Alabama Hills. That first icy-cold winter, Mary saw the gathering storms over the Eastern Sierra. She watched the heavy snow falling on the mountain slopes and observed how it "spread over the young firs in green-ribbed tents."[11] In her poem "The Coming of the Snow," composed in 1894 and carefully copied into her composition notebook, she wrote:

Follows a little darkening of the air,
With cattle gathering on the lower hills
And sparrows querulous of coming ills,
And so day passes ere we are aware.

Rises the wind by night and builds a roof
Wherein his busy hands with warp and woof
Of frost and cloud go swiftly to and fro
Weaving the white pavilions of the snow.[12]

At George's Creek, Austin was enchanted by the "smell of [burning] sage at sundown" and the "twilight twinkle of shepherd fires." She called the Alabama Hills the Twilight Hills and delighted in the blooms of the White Granite Gilia, a Sierra wildflower—called "evening snow" by local children—that opens at night. She also was intrigued by the lavender-blue lupine that grew on the mesas, "not holding any constant blue, but paling and purpling."[13] Writing in her composition notebook, she described the scene in verses from her poem "A Twilight Hill":

And here the blundering night-moth doth disclose
The scented hollow where the currant grows,
And there the murky bloom of gilia glows
Like nuns at prayer, milk-white.

Some beams shall light the far, dark, tapered firs,
A quail belated to its covert whirs
In nesting hollows where the warm wind stirs
The lupines everywhere.[14]

The Austins returned to Lone Pine when Wallace was offered a position as superintendent of schools. Still deeply in debt, to earn additional income Mary took Ruth and moved to Bishop, sixty miles north, to teach English, literature, and art at the Inyo Academy. Two years later, she accepted a teaching position in Lone Pine. Throughout this period, she struggled to continue her writing. In the summer of 1899, she visited Los Angeles and met the flamboyant editor Charles Lummis, who advised her on publishing her work.[15] When she returned to the Owens Valley, she settled in Independence, where Wallace had taken a position as registrar of federal lands at the U.S. General Land Office, part of the U.S. Department of the Interior.

While in Los Angeles, Austin had lectured on the subject of western nature study. Her passionate interest in botany—developed during her childhood—was reinforced by her great gift for the close observation of nature and her study of science. As a young girl she envied the life of Charles Robertson, a professor of botany at Blackburn College. She would "see him occasionally setting out with [his] . . . botany case, or coming home . . . smelling of meadowsweet" after his excursions into the woods to find specimens. The Austins began collecting plant samples in the Eastern Sierra and gathered "more than three hundred species" of wildflowers in Kearsarge Canyon.[16] Wallace was a careful collector, naming and classifying each specimen and noting the location and date of collection. There were many flowers in the grasslands of the valley and acres of wildflowers in the alpine meadows. In a canyon by the headwaters of Independence Creek, Onion Valley was blanketed with flowers each spring. Austin featured it in a verse from her poem "Blue-Eyed Grass":

Blue-eyed grass in the meadow
And yarrow white on the hill,
Cat-tails that rustle and whisper
To a wind that is never still;
Blue-eyed grass in the meadow,
And a laden bee's low hum,
Milkweed that runs to be first in the field
Before the butterflies come.[17]

In 1900, the Austins began construction of a two-story house in Independence, partly paid for by the money from Mary's stories and poems. It was, she noted, a "friendly little town," possessed "of not more than 200 or 300 inhabitants . . . with the County Courthouse, two saloons, three stores, and the hotel."[18] She was able to stop teaching and devote her time to her writing. The Austins put Ruth, who exhibited severe behavioral problems and had been diagnosed with a mental disability, in the care of a local farm couple. Their new home, one of the largest in the community, was located at the end of Market Street, a block and a half from the center of town, with an unobstructed view of Kearsarge Peak. Austin's literary efforts during the six years she lived in Indepen-

Of her home, "the brown house under the willow-tree," Austin wrote: "There you shall have such news of the land, of its trails and what is astir in them, as one lover of the land can give to another." Although it is not known how well Austin and Forbes knew each other, Forbes frequently stayed at the hotel down the street from Austin's house. Austin could have taken special interest in Forbes' photography: She claimed a family history descended from Pierre Daguerre, who, she noted in her autobiography, was related to Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, the inventor of the daguerreotype.

COUNTY OF INYO, EASTERN CALIFORNIA MUSEUM

dence resulted in the publication of *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), *The Basket Woman* (1904), *Isidro* (1905), and *The Flock* (1906). *The Land of Little Rain* was well received by eastern critics. Copies were shipped to Independence and arrived by buckboard from the Carson and Colorado railroad depot at Keeler. A local business proprietor, J. E. Eibeshutz, handled the sale of the book at his general store.[19]

"THE LAND HAD CALLED HIM"

In 1902, Andrew Forbes settled in Bishop, north of Independence. Originally called Bishop Creek, it was named after Samuel Bishop, one of the first cattle ranchers in the valley. Forbes traveled around the region, earning his living by taking pictures of the local inhabitants; towns, farms, ranches, and mines; the Owens Valley; and the surrounding mountains.

By the late 1880s, factory-made dry plate negatives, less messy than hand-coated wet plates, were available and by the turn of the century cameras were slightly less bulky. With his "photographic outfit," which included his tent, camera, glass negatives, paper stock, and other equipment in his wagon, Forbes rode from town to town. His tent functioned as a portable makeshift studio. Each summer from mid-June through August, after the winter snow had melted at the lower elevations, he packed his gear and headed for the mountains, seeking the ideal vistas and perfect lighting for his memorable images of the Eastern Sierra. He photographed in the early morning and late afternoon, when the light produced deeper shadows and more dramatic scenes.

The Eastern Sierra, especially the sublime vistas of Yosemite Valley, north of the Owens Valley, captured the imagination of many nineteenth-century landscape photographers. Charles L. Weed (1824–1903) produced the first photographic images of Yosemite in 1859, using large 11 x 15 inch glass negatives hand-coated with light-sensitive chemicals; his work was followed in 1861 by that of Carleton E. Watkins (1829–1916), whose scenic views were produced from mammoth 18 x 22 inch glass negatives. Ansel Adams

(1902–1984), the most famous Yosemite photographer, first photographed Yosemite in 1916 with a Kodak Brownie box camera. He later used an 8 x 10 inch view camera to make the negatives for his prints. Forbes' black-and-white images of the Eastern Sierra—generally recognized as the 125-mile-long region extending from Mount Whitney in the south to Yosemite National Park in the north—taken from 1900 to 1916, precede Adams' work; Adams photographed many of the same vistas, including the Owens Valley, Alabama Hills, and Kearsarge Pinnacles.[20]

Shooting from across the Owens Valley, Forbes captured the scenic grandeur of snow-covered Mount Humphreys, at 13,986 feet the highest peak in the Sierra National Forest. He photographed the rugged beauty of the Owens River canyon, with white water swirling past granite boulders. His lens focused on a sweeping image of the Owens River, flowing through mountain woodlands to the valley below. He portrayed Bishop Creek Canyon, with tumbling water cascading downward for 6,000 feet, and Bishop Creek, flowing past fir trees on the mountain slopes. Of the eighty lakes within a few miles of the creek, Forbes photographed the lake at the north fork of the creek near Piute Pass and the one at the head of the creek's south fork. Some of Forbes' photographs document the heavy imprint of human activity on this once-unspoiled landscape, revealing severed trees and stumps, abandoned structures, cabins, and well-worn mountain trails.

Forbes envisioned the exciting prospect of establishing the first successful photography studio in the Owens Valley. He began his venture sometime between 1902 and 1904, opening his studio in Bishop on West Line Street. (The first photography studio in Yosemite Valley had opened in 1870, and by 1902 several businesses were competing for Yosemite's studio trade.) He ran a weekly advertisement in the *Inyo Independent*, noting his expertise in "mountain, stock, and Indian views" and in "portrait work in any style." To promote his photography business he offered a free enlargement with every dozen portraits.[21]

Although he sold numerous portraits, Forbes' main source of revenue was from scenic prints and picture postcards, which were easily reproduced from glass plate negatives. He maintained an index to his postcards, which noted the subject and date. Postcards, originally called mailing cards and used for advertising, were introduced in 1861. Forbes' picture postcards predate those of Burton Frasher, who began photographing the West, including the region around Bishop, in the 1920s. The originator of Frashers Fotos, black-and-white postcards sold nationwide, Frasher would become the West's leading producer of picture postcards.

A frequent visitor to towns, farms, and ranches, Forbes rode through the basin taking pictures and marketing his prints and postcards. His photographs captured the transition of small, dusty towns into thriving communities with picket-fenced, wood-framed houses; streets lined with poplars; and increasing numbers of people putting down roots in the valley soil. On October 17, 1902, the *Inyo Independent* announced that Forbes was in Independence, "so give him a call soon." A week later, he was doing a "rushing business" in pictures. In November he was photographing in Lone Pine and returned to Independence in December. In February 1903, the newspaper noted, he was in Big Pine with his tent, where he would remain for a few weeks. The following May he was back in Independence. He visited again in November and stayed a week. In early December, he "returned to Bishop," but "took quite a number of beautiful views of the Sierra Nevadas while here which he will have finished up soon."[22]

Forbes created an illustrated catalog to market his photographs. Orders, "unless otherwise specified," were filled in black and white.

Forbes used a photograph of Independence, which Austin described as "a friendly little town" that was "scattered on two or three streets and bracing itself against desolation," for this picture postcard. Along with scenic prints, postcards were a primary source of his revenue.

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Photographs were also available in "cepia [*sic*], green and firelight tones." His 10-inch-wide panoramas averaged seventy-five cents per foot. His breathtaking 32-foot panorama of the Sierra Nevada in thirteen sections was listed at $15.00. Other panoramic views of the Sierra cost between $1.75 and $4.00. Black-and-white 8 x 10 inch photographs sold for five cents. Forbes also sold lantern slides, which could be projected onto a large screen, and stereo cards, which provided three-dimensional images. His catalog was arranged by subject, among them clouds and lightning, mountains, desert, cattle, horses, sheep, and goats. There was also a section on the different groups of Indians. He sold photographs of picturesque locales, such as the Keeler depot east of Owens Lake. Expanding his photography trips, he began marketing a broader range of landscape photography, including scenes of Mammoth and Yosemite. In addition to his photographs, he rented cameras and sold them, along with photographic supplies, to local residents and tourists who stopped by his Bishop studio.[23]

"THE PROMISE OF THE LAND"

At the turn of the century, the transcontinental line came to Reno, Nevada. There it connected with a narrow-gauge railroad that ran to the Keeler depot, bringing tourists from the East traveling in relative style and comfort. As Austin observed, "People were beginning to make their way into Inyo; people from the Sierra Club, mountain-climbers and explorers, botanists, hunting and fishing people; [and] collectors of Indian baskets."[24] Although the landscape of Yosemite was more spectacular, the *Inyo Independent* proclaimed that "there is no place in the United States that can offer a more varied or grander scenery than the mountains and valleys of the Sierras in Inyo county."[25]

Like tourists to the region, Forbes was drawn to the 12,618-foot Kearsarge Peak at the edge of the Owens Valley, and he photographed it, snow-covered, with the little town of Independence in the foreground. Kearsarge Pass was originally a Paiute trading route. When gold and silver were discovered in 1864, miners flocked to the mountain. It became a successful mining district until an avalanche destroyed it in 1867. There is a string of alpine lakes in Kearsarge, resting in granite basins. Forbes photographed small, picturesque Kearsarge Lake above Onion Valley and Sunset Lake near Kearsarge Pass. Austin noted how most lakes in the Eastern Sierra are green, not blue. As she observed, "The lake is the eye of the mountain, jade green, placid, unwinking, also unfathomable."[26]

While photographing in the southern part of the valley, Forbes stayed in Independence at the Norman House on the corner of Edwards and Market streets, down the block from Austin's house. It was a first-class hotel with thirty bedrooms, where one could board by the day, week, or month. The hotel's register indicates that visitors frequently came to Independence from Los Angeles, Sacramento, and Reno. Hundreds of tourists a year visited the region, arriving, increasingly, from as far away as Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.[27]

Forbes photographed one of Inyo's most popular tourist sites, Winnedumah Paiute Monument, an 80-foot granite monolith in the White-Inyo Mountains, immortalized in a Native American legend. In one version of the tale, Winnedumah, a medicine man, travels into the mountains to find his brother, Tinemaha, who has been slain in a battle with the Shoshones. The god Taupee turns Winnedumah into a granite spire to watch over the Paiute tribe. Like Forbes, Austin recognized the popular appeal of the striking granite formation, which could be seen from Kearsarge Pass. She appropriated the legend for her poem "Winnedumah," which recounts the medicine man's transformation into "the granite boulder high above the white-pine wood."[28]

"THE CLANS WHO HAD OWNED THE EARTH"

In 1900, approximately one thousand Native Americans lived in the Owens Valley. The influx of ranchers and homesteaders had destroyed half their population and their original way of life. "The Paiutes," Austin wrote, "had made their last stand at the border of the Bitter Lake" in the 1860s when thirty-five Indians were killed or driven into Owens Lake to drown.[29] In 1902, a federal grant created reservation land for Indian settlement at Independence Camp. Paiute men worked on local farms and ranches; women found jobs as household help in local homes. The children attended the Indian schools in the valley.

In response to the relegation of the Indians to reservations and the destruction of their way of life, there was a growing movement to preserve what remained of Native American culture. Some Americans held a romantic image of Indians living in harmony with nature. But, Austin observed, in the Owens Valley "the clans who owned the earth, [had] fallen into the deplorable condition of hangers-on." Burdened with household chores and worries about her disabled daughter, Austin employed a Paiute housekeeper and befriended the local Indian women. She attended some of the Paiute ceremonies and celebrations and recorded their songs with a home phonograph using wax cylinders. Visiting their camps, she watched as Paiute women dug wild hyacinth roots, gathered seeds, and crafted their willow baskets. She listened to their "folk tales, famine tales, love and long-suffering," and wove their words into her stories and poetry.[30] In "The Song-Makers," she penned one of her "re-expressions" of Native American "song":

Oh, a long time
The snow is over all the mountain.
The deer have come down and the big-horn,
They have passed over Waban.
A long time now we have eaten seeds
And dried flesh of the summer's killing,
We are wearied of our huts.
The mists have come down like a tent,
They have hid the mountain.
And on a day suddenly comes the sun.
The mists are withered away,
The grass is seen on the mountain![31]

Forbes was equally attracted to the native culture and photographed the Paiute encampments in the valley. The houses, "brown wickiups in the chaparral," as Austin called them, had changed little over time; only a few Owens Valley Indians owned their own land and worked their own farms. Forbes, who had photographed a wide range of Native American groups as he traveled across the country, made friends with the local Indians who "would gather to sit and socialize on the edge of the boardwalk in front of his studio." In his portrait work he created numerous artistic poses of Paiute women in their maternal role. The recurrent image of a mother and child, thought-provoking in the universality of its underlying themes, proved a popular subject. Forbes also photographed Paiute women with their beautiful willow baskets decorated with intricate patterns; Austin described one as "a design in colored bark of the procession plumed crests of the valley quail."[32]

Like Austin, Forbes frequently focused on the feminine and artistic aspects of Paiute culture. Taken out of their larger context, removed from time and place, these images were sold as decorative art, sentimental souvenirs, and picture postcards to be sent to family and friends. Nevertheless, they captured the resilience and dignity of native people displaced in the valley of the Eastern Sierra.

Forbes used a painted backdrop to make this photograph of a Paiute mother and child, a frequent subject of his souvenir postcards. Paiute women, after recovering from childbirth, wove cradle baskets to carry their infants. As Austin wrote of Seyavi, a Paiute basket maker, "Twice a year, in the time of white butterflies and again when young quail ran neck and neck in the chaparral, Seyavi cut willows for basketry by the creek where it wound toward the river against the sun and sucking winds."

SEAVER CENTER FOR WESTERN HISTORY RESEARCH, LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

PINION TREE

Mary Hunter Austin (September 9, 1868 – August 13, 1934) was a great American nature writer, novelist, essayist and free spirit who wrote prolifically about the Southwest and the Owens Valley. Author of The Land of Little Rain and many other books, her best writing explores nature or Native American life, and has the transcendental tone and occasional primitivist leaning found in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Muir. She graduated from Blackburn College in 1888, married Stafford W. Austin in 1891, and for several years lived in various towns in Owens Valley. She separated from her husband in 1905 and moved to Carmel, California. Her travels to Italy, France, and England, and friendships with various intellectuals of the time strengthened her feminist ideas and added a strong commitment to socialism to her own deeply personal and sustaining form of mysticism. In 1924 she settled in Santa Fe.

Wind in the Pine Leaves

In Forbes' photographs, the scenic pageantry of the forests enhances majestic mountain views. The trees in the Eastern Sierra include cottonwood, quaking aspen, white fir, and red fir, and seven species of pine grow in the mountains above Independence. Austin captured a telling detail of the forest when she wrote about "pine trees [that] creak although there is no wind." In another passage, she described the mournful sound of a Jeffrey pine "sighing its soul away upon the wind."

One of Forbes' intriguing images is a lone piñon pine on a rocky slope, silhouetted against a clear sky. In her unpublished poem "The Procession of the Pines," Austin suggests a dramatic view of pines on the Sierra slopes:

The willows follow the white-foot streams
And grow at the water's will;
But ever and always the pines keep on
Marching over the hill.
Darkly they troop by butte and pass,
Riving great rocks for place
And the foremost ones are bent and bowed
Like runners stretched in a race.

Seaver Center for Western History Research, Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History; poem from "The Procession of the Pines," Mary Austin Collection, Henry E. Huntington Library, AU 465

"THE STREETS OF THE MOUNTAINS"

When his horse or mule reached the end of a trail during his forays into the mountains, Forbes carried his photographic equipment on his back to get the scenic views he wanted. On mountain summits, he began using a large, panoramic Circuit camera, rotating on a turntable mounted on a tripod. He created scenic panoramas described by one author as "technical *tours de force*" and experimented with "aerial photography by suspending the camera from a series of large kites."[33] He photographed hundreds of different panoramic scenes of the mountains and valley. One huge panorama, showing 250 miles of the Sierra Nevada, measured 32 feet.[34]

Packing into the mountains, Forbes photographed Lone Pine Lake, elevation 9,940 feet, with a sunlit cloud overhead. As Austin observed, in the mountains "the clouds came walking on the floor of heaven, flat and pearly gray beneath, rounded and pearly white above." Forbes also photographed the waterfalls on Lone Pine Creek with their "incessant white and tumbling waters." A mountain range without streams, Austin wrote, is "forsaken of most things but beauty and madness and death and God."[35]

On camping trips in the mountains, Austin slept in her bedroll beneath the pines. In early July 1904, she and her friend Leila Scovil camped in the mountains above Independence. At the end of the month she camped again, this time via Kearsarge trail, with a large party that included members of the Eibeshutz family.[36] She also camped in Kearsarge with Wallace, an avid outdoorsman. In the summer the mountains offer relief from the overwhelming heat in the valley, where the average daytime summer temperature is 97 degrees. As Austin complained, "It is insufferably hot here in the summer." However, as she reflected, "Never believe what you are told, that midsummer is the best time to go up the streets of the mountain . . . for seeing and understanding, the best time is when you have the longest

In 1873, the naturalist John Muir became the first to reach the top of Mount Whitney from the eastern slope. Trails across the Sierra were built around the turn of the century, reflecting Americans' growing interest in wilderness preservation, the dramatic landscapes of the West, and the recreational enjoyment of nature. In June 1904, after the snows had melted at the middle elevations, Forbes made the 11-mile trip to the summit of Mount Whitney to capture its scenic beauty with his lens. In what may be a self-portrait, he is shown carrying his photographic equipment on his back. As Austin observed, "Who shall say what another will find most to his liking in the streets of the mountains."

Seaver Center for Western History Research, Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History

leave to stay." Although the horseback trips taxed her strength, Austin loved the "meadows, little strips of alpine freshness, [which] begin before the timberline is reached."[37] At night there was the rosy comfort of a crackling fire, as she fancifully described in these lines from her unpublished poem "The Camp Fire":

Then you wake up on your bed of springy needles,
Lie up snug to watch the heart-wood glow and char,
While the water in the runnels purrs and wheedles,
From the meadows where the folded lilies are.
Only wake to hear the wood folk, round you going,
Thread the pine boles with small noises low and least,
See the embers in the wavering ash heap glowing,
Red and winking, like the eyeballs of a beast.[38]

THE FUTURE OF THE VALLEY

In contrast to the open spaces of the mountains, the valley floor was populated with a growing number of homesteads. By the turn of the century, more than 400 family farms and ranches had spread out across the once arid landscape. As Austin confirmed, "With the slow decline of mining, agricultural possibilities in Inyo began to come to the fore."[39] Fields of oats, alfalfa, wheat, and barley dotted the basin, where boughs in the orchards hung heavy with apples, peaches, and pears. Grapes grew in the vineyards, descending from arbors in gardens of geraniums and hollyhocks. More than 40,000 acres of the valley were under cultivation, but much of the basin still lacked water. Valley residents hoped that even more acres of fertile valley land could be irrigated with water from ditches fed by mountain streams.

Each year thousands of sheep and cattle were driven through the basin to graze in the mountains. The tinkle of sheep bells could be heard across the valley as flocks were driven along the mesa trail "in a windless blur of dust." As Austin explained, "the flocks passed behind the Alabamas, going swiftly till they came on the broad mesa pastures at George's Creek."[40] Sometimes there were conflicts between the "wool and mutton men" and the cattlemen over the grassy slopes. Austin depicted the approximately 10-mile drive up Lone Pine Mountain, also known as Sheep Mountain, in these lines from her poem "The Coyote and the Carrion Crow":

At the end of the barley harvest when the foothill pastures fail,
When the streams are stopped at their fountains and the dry, hot winds prevail,
Then the hungry herds of the southland go up by the mesa trail.
To the snow-fed northern pastures the crawling dust heaps go,
And the gray coyote scents them afar and signals the carrion crow.[41]

At an October 1903 school Halloween party, Austin, costumed as a witch, told fortunes to seventh and eighth grade students as she peered "into the misty future."[42] But she could not have predicted the future of the Owens Valley. In 1902, the U.S. Congress had passed the National Reclamation Act to provide water to arid, inhospitable land in the West. A massive land reclamation project in the Owens Valley was planned. Mountain streams would flood new irrigation canals, and 60,000 acres of arid public land and 50,000 acres of private land would be irrigated. Federal engineers already were exploring the watersheds and measuring the rivers and streams, including the Owens River, Bishop Creek, and Pine Creek, and a report had been submitted to the federal government discussing possible sites for the dam, reservoir, and irrigation plant.

The U.S. General Land Office in Independence, where Wallace Austin was employed, handled all matters regarding public land, including surveys, maps, and deeds. As registrar he was in charge of all official records, and his office assisted reclamation project engineers. He also was active in county politics, and the irrigation project was

much discussed in those circles as well. In 1904, he was elected a member of the Republican Central Committee and represented the county at the state's Republican convention.

Forbes also was knowledgeable about many aspects of the region, having photographed much of it, including the lakes and streams that formed the watersheds of the Eastern Sierra. As a result of his expertise, in 1905 he received a new assignment: photographing the valley's water sources. The *Inyo Register*, published in Bishop, and the *Inyo Independent*, published in Independence, both remarked on Forbes' photographic mission. William A. Chalfant, editor of the *Inyo Register*, announced that "Photographer Forbes is out picturing the water supply sources of the valley under arrangement with Fred Eaton. What it's for no one knows." The *Independent* reported that Forbes "went to Cottonwood" and was "making a thorough collection of photographic views of all the mountain streams and camping places along the Sierra from Olancha to Long Valley for Fred Eaton." The reference to Fred Eaton, who was credited with spearheading the controversial diversion of water from the Owens Valley to Los Angeles County, involved Forbes in a controversy over the region's water rights that is still addressed today.[43]

As part of his documentation for Eaton, Forbes photographed Cottonwood Creek, named for the cottonwood trees, which leads to the Cottonwood Lakes, a string of thirteen lakes northwest of Olancha. But it is unlikely that these or any other "camping places" were of much interest to Eaton; Forbes may have been taken in by Eaton's disingenuous explanation for his curiosity about the mountain streams.

Fred Eaton came from a prominent Los Angeles family that helped found the city of Pasadena. At age fifteen, he went to work for the Los Angeles City Water Company; he became superintendent of the company and then mayor of Los Angeles.

Ironically, it was Wallace Austin's brother Frank who first interested Eaton in the Owens River water. In 1892, Eaton traveled to the valley at Frank's invitation to investigate Austin's irrigation project. He visited the Owens Valley several times afterward, bringing his good friend William Mulholland, superintendent of the newly created Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, to the area in September 1904. Traveling by buckboard, they camped out along the way. Eaton developed a scheme with Mulholland to divert Owens River water to Los Angeles and began buying properties and water rights on the Owens River. To identify locations to purchase, he made use of the records and plat maps in the General Land Office. Only later was it disclosed that he was representing Los Angeles and working for Mulholland to secure properties and water rights to build an aqueduct to Los Angeles.[44]

Across the West towns were growing as people relocated from rural areas. By 1900, the population of the city of Los Angeles was more than 100,000; thirty years earlier, it was less than 6,000. In the decade between 1890 and 1900, the population had doubled. The city's balmy climate and golden orange groves lured new residents. As the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce and other organizations stressed the importance of growth, bankers, newspaper publishers, politicians, and real estate developers became boosters for Los Angeles' virtues.

But the city faced a serious water shortage. The Los Angeles River and groundwater from rain were inadequate and unreliable. An effort to conserve water through a metering program proved insufficient. The city required an additional source of water to sustain its expanding population and allow for future growth. To meet those needs, Eaton proposed a 233-mile aqueduct, at a cost of $23 million, to supply Owens Valley water to Los Angeles.

When the Los Angeles press released news of the proposed aqueduct, the headlines of the *Inyo Register* protested, "Los Angeles Plots Destruction: Would Take Owens River, Lay Lands Waste." Forbes joined a Bishop committee to fight the aqueduct. He worked with Chalfant, editor of the *Inyo Register* since 1887, to oppose the project. Chalfant used Forbes' photographs as propaganda to publicize the importance of the Owens Valley as a farming and ranching community. He ran articles and advertisements in the *Inyo Register* to increase support for the area and published a twenty-five-page special edition in July 1907 extolling the benefits of living in the Owens Valley.[45]

The Austins, like other residents of the area, were stunned at the revelation that Eaton and Mulholland had successfully obtained the rights to Owens Valley water. Austin recalled in her autobiography: "Suddenly it burst upon the people of Inyo that they were trying to secure the waters of Inyo. Everything had been done. The Reclamation Service had been won over. The field papers had changed hands. Transfers had been made. Sales had been effected. A Los Angeles man, Eaton, had been in the Valley all this time spying and buying."[46]

As registrar of the General Land Office, Wallace Austin was in a unique position to understand the significance of what had happened. He had long held a vision of successful land reclamation in the Owens Valley. In response to what had now come to light, he "warned that Los Angeles' plans would result in the destruction of the valley's economy." He wrote to the commissioner of the General Land Office in Washington and to President Theodore Roosevelt, trying to persuade the federal government to continue its massive reclamation project in the Owens Valley.[47]

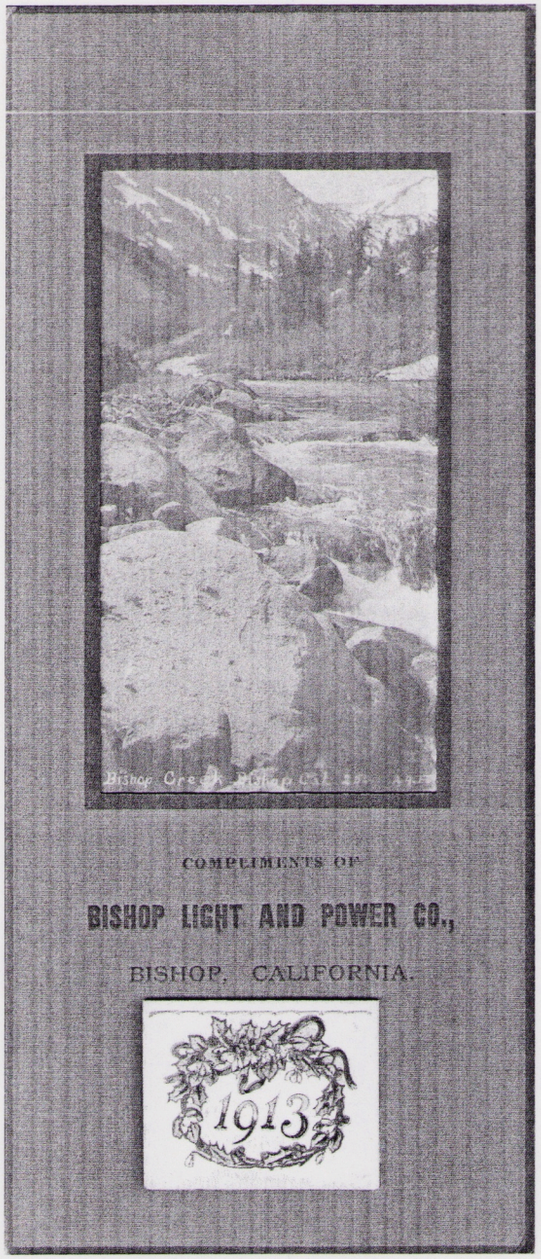
Mary Austin also took up the cause. She criticized the aqueduct in an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on September 3, 1905, and paid a personal visit to William Mulholland at his Los Angeles office. Mulholland conceded that she was one of the few people who understood the long-term implications of what was happening in the Owens Valley.[48]

City leaders and the press convinced Los Angeles residents that a lack of rainfall and impending drought would cause the city to run out of water. Anticipating the delivery of aqueduct water to a reservoir in the San Fernando Valley, speculators bought up the land for 50 cents an acre and sold it for as much as $600 an acre after it was subdivided. As Wallace Austin wrote, "In Owens Valley [the water] will make homes for 100,000 people of moderate means, while in the San Fernando Valley it will be accessible only to the rich and the land and the water will be in control of speculators and middle men."[49]

In February 1906, Los Angeles surveyors set up camp in a "village of tents" near Blackrock Springs, north of Independence and south of where the aqueduct would leave the river. In March they were at George's Creek, surveying "the first section, from the intake to the Alabama Hills."[50] By the end of 1908, the preparation work was completed and construction on the aqueduct began. When finished, it would supply more water than Los Angeles needed, and Owens Valley water would be used for agriculture and development in the San Fernando Valley.

For now, thousands of acres of public land that were formerly the responsibility of the General Land Office—acres that could have been successfully irrigated and made available to homesteaders—were declared off-limits to homesteading. In 1907, to protect the aqueduct route, they were made part of the forest reserve, even though there were no trees.

Despite the blistering desert heat, equipment failures, and labor conflicts, the concrete-and-steel aqueduct was completed in 1913. Using the forces of gravity to carry water to Los Angeles, it was a triumph of engineering. The water and



Forbes' image of Bishop Creek graced the 1913 calendar of the Bishop Light and Power Company—evidence of the town's development. Of the water in the mountains, lakes, creeks, and streams, Austin wrote: "Whatever goes up or comes down the streets of the mountains, water has the right of way; it takes the lowest ground and the shortest passage." She described "the fashion in which a mountain stream gets down from the perennial pastures of the snow"; eventually it "tumbles into a sharp groove between hill flanks, curdles under the stream tangles, and so arrives at the open country and steadier going."

Seaver Center for Western History Research, Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History

hydroelectric power allowed Los Angeles to experience a boom in population, housing, and business. The availability of raw materials, water, electricity, and transportation allowed industries to develop and expand. Los Angeles became the largest manufacturing center in the country.

But, in the following decades, the diversion of water into the Los Angeles Aqueduct dried up 60 miles of the Owens River and completely drained Owens Lake. Cottonwood trees that grew along riverbanks died. Irrigation ditches went dry. Homesteads and farms were abandoned. Fruit trees were sold as firewood. Vineyards withered away. Fertile green fields reverted to sagebrush. The valley's agricultural economic base disappeared.

The shocking turn of events affected the Austins dramatically. By early 1906, Wallace Austin had resigned his position as registrar at the General Land Office. In July and August 1905, he and several of his supporters had filed claims on water surpluses in the valley on behalf of the residents, which proved worthless and resulted in considerable humiliation when he was publically ridiculed by Fred Eaton in the Los Angeles press.[51]

The Austins sold their house in Independence and committed Ruth to an institution in Santa Clara. Mary moved to Carmel, and Wallace eventually relocated to Trona in the Mojave Desert. The tragedy of the Owens Valley no doubt contributed to the stress and disappointment in the Austins' marriage; they never resumed married life and were divorced in 1914. Mary Austin went on to become one of America's most important women writers and a spokeswoman for Native American rights. In 1917, she published *The Ford*, a fictionalized account of the Owens Valley water conflict. She died in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on August 13, 1934. In 1966, an Eastern Sierra peak located 8.5 miles west of Independence was named in her honor—Mount Mary Austin—with an elevation of 13,048 feet.

Forbes' life was not impacted as forcefully as was the Austins'. His home and studio were in Bishop, which unlike Independence was north of the Owens River aqueduct intake and thus unaffected by the impending diversion of water to Los Angeles. Furthermore, Forbes' ability to earn a living was not in jeopardy. He remained in Bishop during the construction of the aqueduct and continued his photographic trips around the valley and in the mountains. In early 1906, the *Inyo Independent* reported that Forbes would be in Independence until February 20, and that he had "pitched his big tent near the drug store and [was] ready for work."[52] The city of Bishop had developed an electrical power plant and the Bishop Light and Power Company featured a Forbes' landscape photograph on its annual calendar.

Forbes continued to participate in community activities and organizations, such as the local theater group. In 1909, he married Mary Rozette Prutsman, who helped run his photography business, often accompanying him on his month-long summer pack trips into the mountains. They had one son, J. McLaren Forbes, born in 1910. But over time Forbes became discouraged by the changes in the valley wrought by the construction of the aqueduct. In 1916, three years after the aqueduct was completed, he sold his Bishop house and studio and moved to Lompoc, California, where he died of a heart attack on March 21, 1921.

"REMEMBERED LANDMARKS"

Today the towns along Highway 395, which runs through the Owens Valley, are studded with restaurants, motels, convenience stores, and gas stations. For their economic survival, they rely on the summer tourist season. When the snow melts and the trails are open, the Eastern Sierra attracts a wide range of visitors. Camping, hiking, fishing, bird watching, and photography are only a few of the activities that draw millions of people to the region each year. The valley itself is largely untouched by the forces of urbanization, and most of it remains in its natural state. Cattle herds graze on land leased from Los Angeles, which owns 300,000 acres in the region. In the late afternoons, Tule elk wander down from the foothills to the valley floor. At night, coyotes lope through the desert sage.

The mountains that overlook the Owens Valley continue to inspire residents and tourists alike. These haunting lines from Austin's "The Coming of the Snow" convey their mystery and timeless beauty:

As yet no wind, but clouds all white and slow,
Blind clouds that halt and fumble as they go,
Touching remembered landmarks, hill and spur,
Hoar pine and sapling, hemlock, spruce and fir,
By lake and fall, by canon, rift and scar.
By long dark reaches where the tamaracks are.[53]

KAREN S. LANGLOIS is Professor of Liberal Studies at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. She specializes in American literary and cultural history. Her previous articles on Mary Austin have appeared in *Huntington Library Quarterly*, *Western American Literature*, *Theatre History*, *California History*, and the *Journal of American Culture*. She received a PhD in American History from Claremont Graduate University.

Let's be done with stranger faces,
let's be quit of staring eyes,
Let's go back across Mojave, where
the hills of Inyo rise.
There's a word we've lost between
us, we will never hear again
In the mindless clang of engines
where they bray the hearts of men,
Let's go seek it east of Kearsarge
where the seven mile shadows run
From the great, gray bulk of Williamson
heaved up against the sun.

Let's go look for Kassuyampa,
with your arm across my shoulders,
Through the canyons of lost rivers,
by the bone-white bleaching boulders,
Through the scented glooming hollows
where the gray wolf shadows flee
And from Eur to Uchebe, only
you and I will be;
And the Word, I cannot name it

but we'll learn its sweetest use
In the moonlit sandy reaches, when
the desert wind is loose.

There's a little creek in Inyo
singing by beyond the town,
Through the pink wild-almond
tangle, and the beaches slim and
brown;

Where all night we'll watch the
star-beams in the shallow open hills,
And the hot, bright moons of August
skulking low among the hills;

And the Word will wake in Inyo
never printed on a page -
With the wind that wakes the morn-
ing, o'er a thousand miles of sage.

- Mary Austin -

MARY AUSTIN
SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

March 15, ' 34

Mrs. John H Lubken
Lone Pine, California.

My dear Mrs. Lubken:

I am immensely interested to haar that a Writer's guild is functioning at Lone Pine, and pleased to have the opportunity of becoming a member. I know it of old as place where inspiration abounds/.

I enclose the necessary dollar, and shall look forward with interest to the next number.

Sincerely yours

Mary Austin

2011 Mary Austin Prize for Writing

The 2011 Mary Austin Prize for Writing will be offered to students of Inyo and Mono counties who are entering the 12th grade in the 2011-12 school year.

A pool of prize money – donated by a Bishop couple with a love for the written word and possibly even greater passion for the natural world – will be divided among a yet-to-be determined number of finalists who submit the top-rated **non-fiction stories related to outdoor experiences in Inyo and Mono counties.**

Entries can detail personal mountain, outdoor or wilderness adventures or those of friends or famous figures; inspirational reflections on the outdoors; historical studies; even humorous cautionary tales – the possibilities are only limited by the authors' imaginations.

An independent panel comprised of writers, Inyo Register staff members, the contest creators, outdoor enthusiasts and other community members will judge the entries.

RULES for the MARY AUSTIN PRIZE:

• All submissions are limited to 600 words and must be non-fiction, adhering to the subject of "outdoor experience(s) in Inyo and Mono counties."

• **Submissions will be accepted from the period of July 1, 2011 to Sept. 1, 2011.** No late entries will be accepted. The winners will be announced in October and the winning stories published in The Inyo Register. Excerpts from submissions may be published periodically.

• Submissions must include a photo of the author and a brief biographical statement to include for publication. Other photos to accompany the stories, such as scenics or action shots, are welcome but will not be judged as part of the overall submission.

Submit stories in Word, pdf or simple text format to: **maryaustinaward@gmail.com**

San Francisco, Cal.
April 23, 1928.

My dear Mrs. Austin:

Your kind letter of the 16th. has just reached me and I am sorry indeed to hear of your long illness. Ican genuinely sympathize with you for I have had years of ill health myself, and know well how discouraging it is to be cut off from all pleasurable activity.

I cannot tell you how much I regret that the people of Owens Valley, especially my brothers, did not accept your offer to help them years ago. I think it probable this later tragedy might have been averted had they availed themselves of your able assistance at that time.

I realize that what you say is true. It is very difficult to get anything published at present and the press stands together on these political issues.

Nevertheless I feel that the time is more favorable now for us than perhaps ever before because of the failure of the St. Francis Dam. At this moment the attention of the public is more or less focused on the Los Angeles Water Board. Also, representatives of the city of Los Angeles are making frantic efforts at this time to put over the Boulder Dam and every day's delay in their accomplishment of this reveals more of their political intrigue.

It seems to me the time is most opportune for us to try and turn the full glare of the spot-light on the Water Board of Los Angeles and show the now interested public just what that Board has been doing in Owens Valley for the past twenty years.

In the long while that Owens Valley has been asking for reparations for the damage done by the city, the Water Board's chief reason for not paying was that "it simply could not be done legally". Now however, in the St. Francis Dam disaster, where the devasted districts cannot be concealed by remoteness, or the ruin camouflaged in any way, the Water Board immediately goes about making reparations and apparently finds no difficulty whatever in getting around the legal point.

Regarding Wilfred and Mark, personally, it is too deplorably true that in their efforts to hold out against the city - efforts that even their enemies admit were almost superhuman - they used funds which were entrusted to them for other purposes.

As the agricultural resouces of the Valley were destroyed by the city, my brothers endeavored to replace this loss to the community by further developement of their own industries, particurlarly the Soda Factory on Owens Lake, which employed scores of men in the lower part of the Valley and maintained a large pay-roll.

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This factory was one of the most expensive industries to carry on becasue as the Owens River was diverted into the Los Angeles Aqueduct the waters of the lake receded so rapidly that it was necessary to spend thousands of dollars in bringing the water to the vats, where formerly the factory had been at the very shore of the lake.

This is only one of many instances where costly damage has been done through the city's policy, and one which is realized by only a few.

At one time, not more than three years ago, my brothers could have turned over to Los Angeles bankers the hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of mortgages they held on the Owens Valley ranches, and a a great profit, thereby saving themselves this present disaster. But by so doing they would have at the same time turned over to the city all these farmers
But by so doing they would have placed all these farmers at the mercy of the city whose agents have at no time been willing to pay fair prices. My brothers held on, believing that the city in all fairness would pay reparations to the towns for thedestruction of business and the depleted property values. The strain however was too long and too great and they went under, with irreparable loss to themselves and possble loss to their many friends in Inyo.

Since Mark and Wilfred's removal all of their various businesses have, through agents of the city, been thrown into bankruptcy, and receivers friendly to Los Angeles put in charge. As a consequence the numerous properties which Wilfrd and Mark turned over for the benefit of their creditors are being dissipated and sold for a mere fraction of their value, so that the creditors are not protected and there will be no chance for my brothers to pay their debts, even when they are free.

As for Wilfred and Mark personally, I know they would be delighteddto hear from you if you feel able to write but all letters are strictly censored, and as they are undeniably political prisoners and spied upon by Los Angeles agents, we have to be very careful not tomwrite anything in detail regarding the L .A, - Ovens Valley water controversy.

Books, which are ver welcomes to them, may be sent fo from the book shop but not from an individual directly.

I enclose a few newspapers articles, about all the favorable publicity we have had.

The enclosed pamphlet is ar reprint of articles which appeared in the Sacramento Union. Immediately following the publication of these articles, Frederick Faulkner, the writer of them, was, through the influence of Los Angeles, retired from the staff of the Sacramento Union.

The enclosed editorial from today's Exaniner indicates how eager the Power Trusts are to get information regarding the Los Angeles water-grab in general. Do you see any chance through this channel for national publicity?

The Lost Rivers of Owens Valley

Frederic Wehrey

Water—who owns it, who uses it—has shaped this landscape from the Paiutes' irrigation canals to the Los Angeles aqueduct. And it is a history in which my own family played a part.

Horses grazing near Independence, California, March 2019

In 2012, archaeologists working with the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power made an unsettling find at the edge of an alkali flat known as Owens Lake, at the southern end of the Owens Valley in eastern California. Buried under the salts was an assortment of musket balls, bullets, buttons from US Cavalry uniforms, and artifacts from the native Paiute peoples (also known by their self-designation, Numa). In excavating the site, the archaeologists had uncovered the first physical evidence of a notorious massacre that had occurred over a century earlier, but that had been preserved only in oral testimonies and omitted in official US Army reports.

On the late afternoon of March 19, 1863, troops from the 2nd Regiment California Volunteer Cavalry and local militias fought a running gun battle with a band of thirty to forty Paiute fighters along a rocky escarpment called the Alabama Hills. Outnumbered, the Paiutes fled to the shores of Owens Lake and, pinned against the shoreline by the advancing whites, waded into its waters. Under the light of the moon, the soldiers and settlers lined the western shore and picked off the Paiutes. Those who didn't die from the bullets drowned.

"The Paiutes had made their last stand at the border of the Bitter Lake," the nature writer and novelist Mary Austin wrote forty years later, in 1903, "battle-driven they died in its waters, and the land filled with cattle-men and adventurers for gold."

It was one of the pivotal skirmishes in the so-called Owens Valley Indian War, which started in 1860 when waves of cattle ranchers, drawn by a mining boom, came into the basin, and wrested the land from the Paiutes. For the Paiutes, the ranchers and their herds, far more than the prospectors, presented a fatal threat to their agrarian society, which included complex networks of irrigation ditches from nearby creeks to carefully tended plots of seeds and tubers. The war that ensued was a three-year cycle of cattle theft, settler vigilantism, and punitive expeditions by cavalry forces. It ended in devastating defeat for the Paiutes and their Shoshone allies. Bereft of their land and livelihood, the natives were relegated to wage labor at the bottom of the frontier order and eventually moved to reservations that exist to this day.

Andrew A. Forbes; courtesy of County of Inyo, Eastern California Museum

A group of young Paiute women, Bishop, California, circa 1910

In the decades that followed, the waters of the lake where the Paiutes had perished dried up, the result of a transfer of mountain snowmelt and valley groundwater to the expanding city of Los Angeles. That controversial and transformative project, led by a gruff Irish-born engineer named William Mulholland, began with the city's purchase of vast tracts of land and extensive water rights in the region, often under deceptive pretexts. It culminated in 1913 with the completion of an aqueduct to Los Angeles and the diversion of the valley's agricultural lifeblood, the Owens River. Deprived of irrigable land and pasture, some farmers, ranchers, and townspeople later turned to violence, dynamiting the aqueduct and committing other acts of sabotage.

Today, a quarter of the Owens Valley floor is owned by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power—an arrangement that, for decades, assisted local ranchers through the city's irrigation of leased grazing land, and that, more recently, has helped to keep unsightly urban sprawl at bay, to the delight of outdoor enthusiasts. But the valley's indigenous activists, environmentalists, and some officials of its struggling towns have long opposed this ownership. Over the years, they have mounted, with only partial success, repeated legal actions against the City of Los Angeles to restore the water levels in the Owens River, limit groundwater pumping, and to return some land and water rights to locals. And they have good reason: with worsening climate change and the city's recent cuts to irrigation on its leases, many in the valley could face an even drier future.

Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis via Getty Images

The Los Angeles Aqueduct running through the Eastern Sierra Mountains, at a spot where the pipeline was dynamited by ranchers in 1927, California, 2012

As struggles over resource extraction, the Owens Valley "Water Wars" carry echoes of the Paiutes' resistance in the century before. And the 2012 excavation of the Owens Lake battle site represented, in a sense, a convergence of the two, chronologically disparate conflicts. The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power had dispatched the archaeologists to survey the area as part of a project to mitigate toxic dust kicked up by winds from the dried-out lakebed. Before the project was undertaken, these carcinogenic plumes—caused by the city's diversion of water to the aqueduct—filled the Owens Valley air with the largest single concentration of particle pollutants in the United States. Last fall, the valley reclaimed the undisputed title of having the most polluted air in America when the town of Bishop, at the northern end of the basin, set a one-day record during the California wildfires.

During the months of those fires, I caught a rare break in the smoke and backpacked through the Owens Valley's western mountains and lingered in its towns. It was, in some sense, a homecoming to a place where my family's roots stretched back generations, and where I'd spent childhood summers and holidays. With America coming to grips with its legacy of dispossession, amid a deadly pandemic laden with its own inequities, it seemed the right time to explore the valley's history of appropriation and preservation.

Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

A view from Manzanar toward the Alabama Hills, photographed by Ansel Adams, California, 1943

An arid stretch of land about four hours' drive from Los Angeles, the Owens Valley is bounded by two parallel fault lines: the snow-capped Sierra Nevada mountains to the west and the White and Inyo Mountains to the east. Among urbanites, the valley is largely known as a scenic route to nearby northern ski slopes and wilderness backpacking, fishing, and rock climbing. Since the 1920s, the region has drawn countless film crews from Hollywood, who have used the rocky terrain as scenery for movies like *Gunga Din, Iron Man,* and *Django Unchained.*

The valley is also home to a shameful chapter in US history when Japanese Americans, most of them citizens, were rounded up and interned in camps by the wartime administration of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. One of those detention facilities, Manzanar, was constructed on the site of an old Paiute village in the shadow of the Sierras. The camp today is a place of memory, empty

and stripped bare, save for a few reconstructed barracks and a guard tower, a museum, and the now-dry koi ponds once tended by the detainees.

Geologists have given a clunky technical term—"graben," from the German for "ditch"—to the action of tectonic movement in the Owens Valley's ancient formation. But I prefer a description from the writer Mary Austin, because it hints at the effect of human agency in modern times, as well as the region's perplexing allure. "A land of lost rivers," she wrote, in 1903, "with little in it to love; yet a land that once visited must be come back to inevitably."

Those lost rivers are, of course, the Paiute irrigation canals. But they are also the valley's major watercourse, the Owens River, diverted by the Los Angeles Aqueduct—a project that Austin opposed in its initial phase. With her prescient embrace of environmentalism, along with her defense of indigenous peoples' rights and her feminism, Mary Austin seems a fitting guide to the region's history and its connection to our troubled present.

Charles Fletcher Lummis

Mary Austin, circa 1900

Born in 1868, in Illinois, to a Civil War veteran father and a church-going mother, she attended a small Presbyterian college, pursuing studies in the natural sciences. After moving to California with her family, she married a Berkeley-educated engineer, but the marriage quickly soured. In

1892, the couple moved to the Owens Valley, where Austin separated from her husband for periods, taught school, and cared for a daughter who had severe mental disabilities. Over the next decade, she took long forays into the wilderness, making detailed notes, listening to native lore, and building a body of short stories, poems, and essays that attracted attention from editors in national publications like *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Settling in the tiny town of Independence, she wrote her best-known work, a collection of sketches of the valley, the adjoining desert, and its inhabitants published in 1903 as *The Land of Little Rain*. From the critical acclaim that greeted that slim volume, her reputation soared, and she was soon moving in literary circles that included Jack London, Joseph Conrad, and Willa Cather.

For decades, I had ignored the book, even though a first edition sat on the shelves in my mother's ancestral home in Independence, down the street from the gabled house where Mary Austin had lived and written. Finally, on a blustery afternoon thousands of miles away on the East Coast, I opened a copy I'd acquired and started to read. The landscape that leapt from those pages was at once familiar and strange—I'd hiked its gullies, canyons, and mesas innumerable times, yet here I struggled to get my bearings. Her beguiling prose is lush with otherworldly descriptions of the flora and weather: fir trees are "star-branched minarets," yucca leaves are "tipped with panicles of fetid, greenish bloom," and thunderstorms "shake down avalanches of splinters from sky-line pinnacles." Animals, meanwhile, are rendered with an idiosyncratic anthropomorphism: a coyote becomes a "water-witch," and owls are "speckled fluffs of greediness." But the most enduring enchantment of the book is its mythopoeic sensibility, replete with references to the lotus-eaters, the Chaldeans, Thor's cup, and "the *Iliad* of the pines," that elevates the land to a transcendent plane.

The Land of Little Rain is also infused with sympathetic portraits of the Paiute people, including a shaman whom Austin befriends only to learn later that he has been executed, according to tradition, when his tribe is stricken by disease and three of its members die under his care. At least one observer has uncovered traces in her book of a Paiute millenarian movement, the so-called Ghost Dance, which aimed at a revival of native society and the eviction of whites. More apparent is Austin's outrage at the sexual violence committed by whites against the indigenous peoples, foreshadowing concerns that would emerge more vociferously in her later feminism. Women, she noted, "became in turn the game of the conquerors."

Today, Mary Austin is more and more lauded as an early environmentalist. "Man is a great blunderer…" she wrote in *The Land of Little Rain*. "It takes man to leave unsightly scars on the face of the earth." Shortly after the book's publication, she and her husband mounted a campaign against the early planning for the biggest man-made scar on her beloved "long brown land"—the Los Angeles Aqueduct. In a 1905 article she wrote for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, she decried what she saw as the "craft and graft" in the city's quest for Owens Valley water, anticipating the legal challenges and violent reactions the aqueduct would provoke in the years ahead: "I promise you there will be entered against the city of Los Angeles incalculable forces," she wrote.

For the native peoples, the valley's water represented not just a livelihood but the very core of their identity and cosmology. The Paiutes call themselves the "water ditch coyote children." Coyote, their demiurge, placed them next to a water ditch—the Owens River.

Corbis via Getty Images

A ranch south of Bishop in Owens Valley, abandoned due to a lack of water, California, 1934

As for me, I am very much a child of the metropolis whose growth was fueled by the diversion of that river. And three of my male relatives worked to meet its unending need for energy. My father was an engineer for Southern California's largest electricity provider, conducting research on wind turbines and electrical vehicles to reduce the city's carbon footprint. My maternal grandfather was an engineer for the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power who lived in the Owens Valley and worked for sixteen years on its waterworks, starting first as a chainman surveyor and hydrographer and rising to become chief engineer and general manager of the entire organization. His father before him had worked on the aqueduct and was a close friend of Mulholland, its architect, serving as a pallbearer at his funeral.

A "towering," "no-nonsense" figure, according to a *Los Angeles Times* obituary, my grandfather defended the aqueduct as vital for the city, deploying the classic utilitarian argument: "The greatest good for the greatest number of people." The water brought from Owens Valley didn't just feed the city's faucets, sprinklers, and swimming pools, but it enabled the livelihood and prosperity of millions. He was similarly vocal in pointing out the attendant benefits of the aqueduct for the valley's economic development, such as a city-built railroad and paved road that transported the ranchers' goods out of the region.

His daughter, my mother, grew up in the Owens Valley and became one of its historians, publishing an oral history of its native and white inhabitants and working as a National Park Service consultant for a museum memorializing the Japanese-American internment at Manzanar. Back when Manzanar was an orchard town, well before the camp, her grandparents had owned a general store and served as the postmasters. In the 1920s, just down the highway from Manzanar, in the town of Independence, her great-uncle had built a hotel for the visiting film crews. The Winnedumah Hotel it's called, after a granite monolith perched on the mountain ridge east of the town. This natural pillar, according to Paiute legend, is actually a Paiute warrior who froze into stone when a rival shouted a magical command, "Winnedumah!" which means, "Stay right where you are!"

I know this story by heart because it is inscribed on a bronze plaque over the stone fireplace in the hotel lobby. On countless winter nights as a child, amid the smell of the log fire and the whoosh of the freight trucks on the highway outside, I read those lines, exulting in their ancient mystery. The owner of the hotel in those days, a part-Paiute woman, used to take me into the desert to hunt for arrowheads. These relics, and the legend, seemed like whispers from a lost world, one now conquered, appropriated, and so frozen in time. *Winnedumah. Stay right where you are.*

Except that nothing is so immutable. The valley is shifting today, and its places and names and ownership are contested. The Alabama Hills, where the Paiutes fought their losing rearguard action before dying at Owens Lake, were named in honor of a Confederate warship, the CSS *Alabama*, by miners sympathetic to the secessionists. Now, in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, there's an effort afoot to remove that name. But replace it with what? Long before last summer's awakening, the Paiutes had rejected the Confederate epithet, revering the hills as the site where, in one of their founding myths, a rampaging giant had come down from the mountains. The monster, too, met his end at Owens Lake—at the hands of a "water baby," an aquatic, fairy-like spirit. In the twentieth century, the myth found a new resonance in the saga of the Los Angeles Aqueduct, with the giant as a stand-in for the ravenous metropolis.

High in the Sierra mountains to the west of the hills, there's a craggy pass where I've often hiked, reveling in the views of the valley. This was once a Paiute trading artery before other miners, this time sympathetic to the Union, dubbed it Kearsarge Pass, after a now-vanished mining town named for a Union warship, the USS *Kearsarge*, that destroyed the CSS *Alabama* in a Civil War naval battle off the coast of France. The pass connects to a trail and wilderness area that stretches across the crest of the Sierras, named for John Muir, the famed naturalist often heralded as the father of America's national parks. In the centuries before, the Paiute used this trail as well, calling it *Nüümü Poyo* or "The People's Road."

Muir was a contemporary of Mary Austin, and his reputation as an environmental writer has long overshadowed hers. For me, though, *The Land of Little Rain* outshines in every respect anything the founder of the Sierra Club wrote. The two authors were actually rivals in their day, sparring in the pages of their books over the land they both loved and its inhabitants. In contrast to Austin's affinity for the Paiute, Muir took a disparaging view of the indigenous peoples, whom he called "dirty," "lazy," and "deadly." Thanks to Black Lives Matter, his lionizers in the American conservation movement have finally been forced to confront the racism of their icon—

a reckoning that for some activists has laid bare the foundational whiteness of the national park enterprise.

More significantly, perhaps, Austin objected to Muir's attempts to impose on the landscape an Edenic pristineness fenced from any working use by humans—including the natives, whose eviction he supported. Instead, she argued for responsible, low-impact land use, especially by shepherds and indigenous people. The grazing of sheep, an animal that Muir derided as a "woolly locust," and especially the Paiutes' controlled burning, she noted, kept the soil healthy and guarded against forest fires. More than a century after her writings, this is a method of resource stewardship that fire scientists and policymakers are reassessing after the infernos of last year—an incipient admission that perhaps the Paiute, and Austin, were right all along.

Frederic Wehrey

Kearsarge Lakes and Pinnacles, west of the Kearsarge Pass, California, 2020

One day last summer, I climbed the mountain at the southern terminus of the John Muir Trail, Mount Whitney. At over 14,000 feet, it is the tallest peak in the forty-eight contiguous states of the United States. While the twenty-two-mile route requires no mountaineering skills, it is still a formidable ascent. Almost every year, tragically, the mountain claims a toll of injuries and deaths—from falls, altitude sickness, or exhaustion, and even by the frequent lightning strikes at its summit in the late afternoon. My own hike was without hazardous incident, except that I was on the trail much longer than I'd expected, the result of dithering at the top.

Night fell as I started the last part of the descent. Soon, the mountain was cloaked in nocturnal blackness—utter, impenetrable blackness, except for the multitude of stars above—"large and near and palpitant," as Mary Austin described them. "Wheeling to their stations in the sky, they make the poor world-fret of no account."

Before long, the battery in my headlamp gave out, leaving me without light to negotiate the twisting switchbacks of the trail. My companion, another solo hiker whom I'd met on the ascent, saved me with a spare. She was a Mexican woman, an experienced trekker in this backcountry, who told me she was from an indigenous group on Mexico's Pacific Coast that had once thrived from fishing. When the waters were fished out, the young people of her tribe had headed north. She herself had dashed across the Mexico–California border two decades ago, working since as a house cleaner in a wealthy ranching town south of Santa Barbara. After the pandemic shuttered that business, she'd spent her days hiking in the Sierras, sleeping in the back of her car.

About an hour or two after we crossed back down below the tree line, into groves of piñon and junipers, we spotted the flashlights and indistinct faces of an approaching party of rangers. They warned us to hurry off the mountain: reports had come in that a mountain lion was trailing some hikers, they said. The rangers were going to deal with the animal.

"And so what?" the Mexican woman said angrily, after they had gone by. "This is the lion's home." She was right, of course.

At the trailhead, near midnight, I said goodbye to my companion and passed another bevy of armed rangers and sheriff's deputies who'd mobilized against the big cat. I was concerned that my family and friends in the valley below might be alarmed by my extended absence. I needn't have worried, though: from the porch of their cabin, they'd tracked me descending the mountain.

The beam of my headlamp had been floating down through the darkness like a falling star.

Frederic Wehrey

Frederic Wehrey is a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the author of *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya* (2018). (March 2019)

The West that inspired author Mary Austin

Rugged Inyo County landscape little changed since mining ruled

But if ever you come beyond the borders as far as the town that lies in a hill dimple at the foot of Kearsarge, never leave it until you have knocked at the door of the brown house under the willow tree at the end of the village street, and there you shall have such news of the land, of its trails and what is astir in them, as one lover of it can give to another. . .

— Mary Austin, The Land of Little Rain

5-7-2000

By Beverly Lauderdale
SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

INDEPENDENCE, Inyo County — On a morning cooled by wind fresh off the snowy Sierra range at our backs, my husband and I stood before Mary Austin's brown house in Independence.

Sensitive, eccentric, brilliant and opinionated, Austin published 30 books and countless shorter pieces early in the 20th century. Her most memorable nonfiction dealt with the deserts, examined from this brown house from roughly 1900 to 1907. A western American lit class and my subsequent portrayal of Austin at a literary theater had drawn me here.

After breakfast, Bob and I had left the Winnedumah Hotel on the main street (also U.S. 395) and rounded a corner. Independence is a small town set on a broad stage. Wide streets are lined with expansive lawns, picket fences, flower gardens and wooden houses under a deep blue sky.

We passed an ancient buggy deteriorating beneath a shade tree. At Austin's house, we discovered her willow tree was gone, and her door was locked, so no one could tell us "news of the land."

While Austin lived in many places, it was here in 1900 that she wrote her classic, "The Land of Little Rain." Although she completed it in just one month, she'd spent 12 years recording myths and folk tales in notebooks.

She, her mother and brothers had arrived in the San Joaquin Valley as homesteaders from Illinois when she was 19. In Bakersfield, Bishop and Lone Pine, she made notes about Indians, vaqueros, dogs and cattle kings. She described wild creatures and "how the spring came on the sweet south wind over the desert."

This morning's wind was not sweet. It tossed a few loose papers along the sidewalk and brought the sound of a pickup. Its driver waved, but we saw his baffled expression: Why would anyone be interested in *that* woman's house?

When she lived here, the townspeople considered Austin outspoken, egocentric and unkind to her husband, Wallace, whom she left for extended periods. Not only did she regard her easy-going husband as an inadequate provider, but Austin longed for the company of other writers.

Often boarding out their mentally retarded daughter, Ruth, she escaped to San Francisco, Carmel and Los Angeles. Neighbors gossiped about Austin's treatment of Ruth and about her decision to institutionalize the child.

Likewise, they couldn't understand her sympathy for prostitutes, Chinese, Hispanics and Native Americans. They were offended when she danced with the Paiutes.

They also dismissed "The Land of Little Rain," a collection of 14 essays deemed a hallmark for Western nonfiction. Even after her death in Santa Fe in 1934, county supervisors vetoed a proposal for a fountain in the author's memory.

Bob and I walked by the Pioneer Methodist Church, a plain white clapboard building with austere bell tower where Austin attended services, taught Bible class and clashed with the pastor. When she and Wallace started a community theater, Austin was read out of the congregation.

Wind swung the lantern over the door, and its creaking trailed us as we headed toward the Eastern California Museum. Unfortunately, it was closed.

We interrupted a workman in the yard, who urged us to return next week and check out the antique photos, the Paiute-Shoshone basket collection, lithographs of petroglyphs, a special display on the Manzanar Internment Camp, 6 miles south, and the gift shop. When I asked about Austin, he frowned. "One of her books might be in there," he said.

He directed us behind the museum to a re-created pioneer settlement, the Little Pine Village. Weathered buildings dating from the 1880s — general store, blacksmith shop, assay office — line a dirt street, each moved from another location during the 1970s and '80s. Aging farm machinery dots the village, along with equipment used to build the Los Angeles Aqueduct — a project that ultimately drove Austin from Independence and the Owens Valley.

In 1906, the Austins tried to alert citizens that speculators were buying Owens River property in order to divert water to Los Angeles. At last, conceding that the cause was lost, Austin walked the land one final time, then sold their house and built a cottage for herself in Carmel. Wallace later divorced her for desertion. She tried life in New York before settling in Santa Fe.

We drove east of town to hike through cactus, mesquite and chaparral. We startled a rabbit and descended into dry arroyos where the scent of sage clung. "If the desert were a woman," Austin wrote, "I know well what she would be: deep-breasted, broad in the hips, tawny, with tawny hair, great masses of it lying smooth along her perfect curves. . . ."

To more easily spot those perfect curves from a higher elevation, we took Market Street west out of town toward Independence Creek. Ours was the lone car on the road into the mountains that the Austins hiked. Where the shoulder allowed, we pulled over to look out at the distant Inyo Range, where mauve-colored peaks appeared older, softer than the Sierra, and at the closer desert with "its immensity of light" — the white of wind-whipped alkali and the yellow-green of sage extending for miles.

When we returned to town, we

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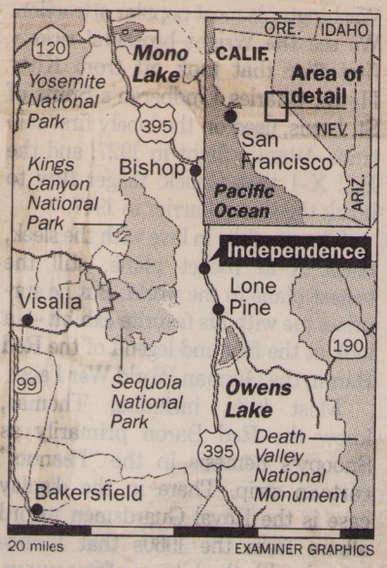

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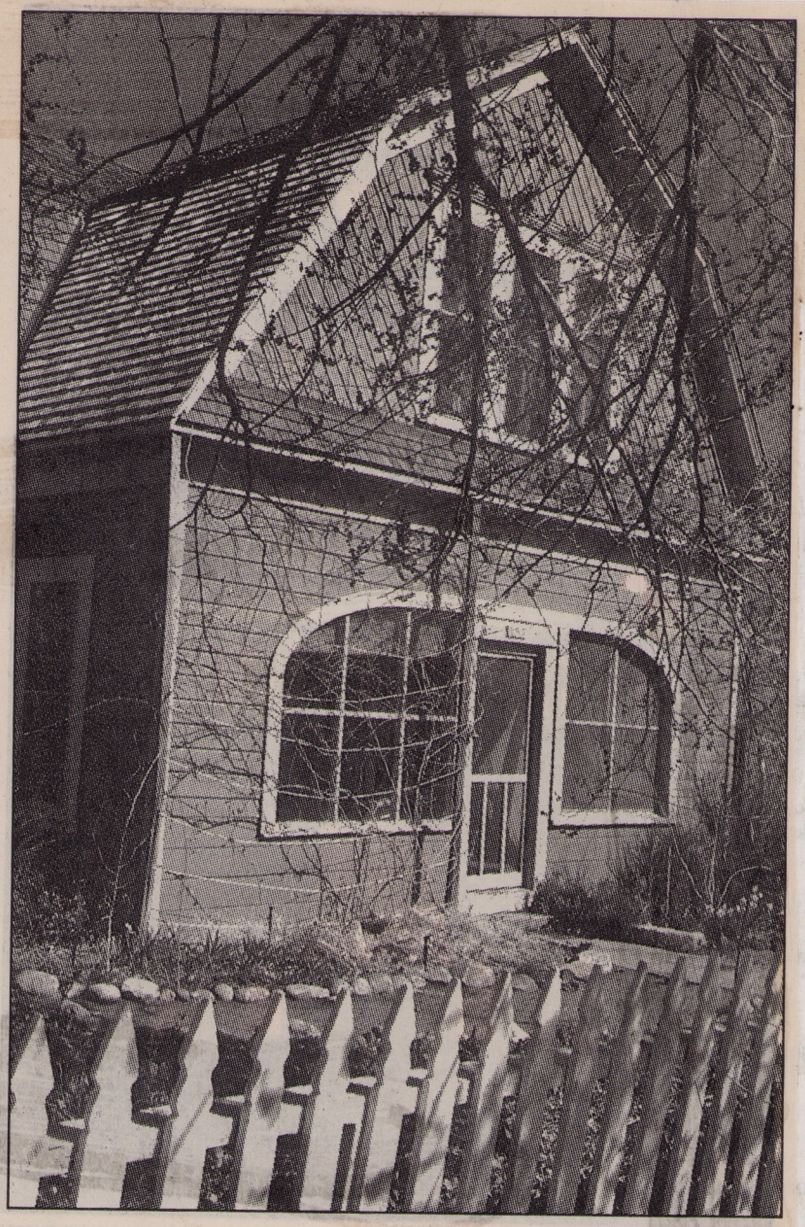
toured the Inyo County Courthouse. The courtroom's old theater-style, fold-down wooden chairs had wires beneath the seats to hold men's hats. In the tiny, one-room library on the bottom floor, I couldn't find any of Austin's fiction.

A block north, we found the Commander's House, a restored Victorian filled with late 19th century furnishings, open to the public. Austin would have seen this home, built in 1872 at Camp Independence 2 miles north of town, when she hunted rocks there for the fireplace she built with her own hands in her brown house. The Commander's House was auctioned off after the camp closed and was later moved to its present location. The museum association restored it in 1961.

Spurred by late afternoon's chill wind, we hurried back to the Winnedumah. A magnificent fireplace from the 1920s dominates the lobby full of Western memorabilia that captures the turn-of-the-century mining spirit, when the town was a stagecoach stop. (When the Austins arrived in 1898, the white population neared 300, and Independence offered a hotel, a saloon and three stores.)

The hotel is a gathering spot for Death Valley-bound tourists. Many, especially those from Japan and Germany, share Austin's awe of this country.



BOB LAUDERDALE

Mary Austin's *brown house is closed these days. Neighbors gossiped about Austin and couldn't understand or accept her sympathy for prostitutes, Chinese, Hispanics and Native Americans.*

The next morning, after checking out, we visited the ruins at Manzanar. As the nation's first internment camp for Japanese Americans, it housed 10,000 (most were U.S. citizens) from 1941-45. Along with a hospital, music hall, judo center, cooperative store, orphanage, auditorium, recreation halls and three churches, nearly 600 barracks marked the land.

Fifty-five years later, two sentry posts, the empty auditorium and the camp cemetery remain. The wind flapped a fading information sign tacked to a board that outlines what happened to this group — people that Austin would have defended.

Wandering through the open space, with its remnants of fruit trees that internees once watered, we spotted a few man-made traces: a concrete foundation block, a shard of pottery. But nature rules this land and is reclaiming her territory. Those who love it, as Austin did, seem to reflect its strength and its disdain for human impact.

Owens Valley's

Mary Austin

by Beverly Webster

Mary Austin home on Market Street in Independence, California, Registered Landmark Number 229; photo by Bill Webster

Opposite: Portrait of Mary Austin by Louis Betts, 1929, by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

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Mary Austin, whom many consider to be California's premier woman writer, found inspiration and direction for her finest writing in Owens Valley. In a brown two-story wooden house on Market Street in Independence Mary Austin wrote her first and most influential book, *The Land of Little Rain.* This collection of essays describing in intimate detail the desert, its creatures, its plants, its harsh environment, its people, would give this courageous and controversial woman instant fame.

The beautiful invitation that Mary offered in this book is inscribed on a plaque that marks the house on Market Street and informs the visitor that the Austin home is California Registered Landmark Number 229. The invitation, though written almost a century ago, is at the same time nostalgic and beckoning.

But if ever you come beyond the borders as far as the town that lies in a hill dimple at the foot of Kearsarge, never leave it until you have knocked at the door of the brown house under the willow-tree at the end of the village street, and there you shall have such news of the land, of its trails and what is astir in them, as one lover of it can give to another.

Today the willow-tree is gone and the view of Kear-

sarge Peak is obscured by the houses and trees, but surely it is not difficult to picture a dedicated young woman writing in her sunny corner of the house — her "wick-i-up," as she called it — or pacing the floor for hours seeking the precise word to convey her meaning.

Mary Austin followed *The Land of Little Rain* with over thirty books, more than two hundred articles, several plays, and many poems. As an author she ranks with Edith Wharton and Willa Cather, among America's most renowned women writers of her era. Mary, however, is not so well known as her two contemporaries since in the early years of this century Western writers found it difficult to get recognition. Further, her books were out of print for many years, and only recently have publishers had the wisdom to reprint her works, realizing their contribution to history and understanding of the West.

Although Mary Austin lived in Owens Valley only from 1892 until 1906, and much of that time she spent in Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Carmel, here she gathered the material for her lifetime of writing. Here she gained her expertise as a botanist and naturalist, and from her friendships with Mexican and Paiute Indian families in Lone Pine and Independence she became knowledgeable in their cultures, powerful resources for her books and articles.

She spent a lifetime championing Indian and Mexican causes and fighting desperately to preserve their folk cultures. As her literary career became established, she lectured nationwide, speaking out on many issues that today are topics of utmost concern. A staunch feminist, believer in the rights of women as individuals, Mary often found her positions at odds with more traditional thinkers of her time, both men and women. She became expert on issues of the environment, Indian affairs, water rights, and land management, and at one point President Theodore Roosevelt sought Mary Austin's personal advice about forest lands and grazing.

Born September 9, 1868, in Carlinville, Illinois, of prominent citizens of that small town, Mary Hunter (Austin) grew up with strong Methodist beliefs and morals that would be continuing influences in her life. From her lawyer father Mary learned the magic of books, announcing to him when quite young that when she grew up she was going to be a writer. Her father, though, dying in her tenth year, would never know her fulfillment of this prophesy.

For the following ten years Mrs. Hunter struggled to raise her two sons and daughter on a small army pension, Mary maturing quickly as she shared responsibility to keep the family together. Overcoming the severe financial hardships however, she and her older brother managed to attend and graduate from Blackburn College in Carlinville.

After her graduation in 1888, Mary and her family left Illinois to homestead in California's lower San Joaquin Valley. The long train trip from Illinois to San Francisco was followed by an ocean voyage down the coast to Southern California, and the family spent another eight days traveling by covered wagon and horseback from Pasadena to their homestead, about twenty miles south of Bakersfield.

The Hunter land adjoined the extensive Tejon Ranch owned by General Edward Fitzgerald Beale, one of California's early settlers and entrepreneurs. The desert environment fascinated Mary, and she spent most of her time on the general's ranch learning about cattle ranching, sheepherding, and the unfamiliar environment. Her inquiring and fertile mind intrigued the general, who became her mentor in botany and geology.

Taking little interest in homesteading, Mary soon accepted a teaching job nearby and boarded with a family with whom she became quite close. They encouraged her friendship with a quiet, serious young man, Stafford Wallace Austin, owner of a vineyard near Bakersfield, and in 1891 Mary and Wallace were married.

Farming turned out not be Wallace Austin's forte, however, and he moved to San Francisco to work with his brother designing an irrigation project for the distant Owens Valley. When Mary joined him she lost no time in taking advantage of the opportunities of the metropolitan area to pursue her writing career. She crossed the Bay with the intention of meeting the librarian of the Oakland Public Library, Ina Coolbrith, first poet laureate of California. Through this contrived but profitable connection Mary contacted the publisher of *The Overland Monthly* in San Francisco, who started publishing her articles. Throughout Mary's career she continued to value Ina Coolbrith's support and friendship.

The Austin's stay in San Francisco lasted but a short time as Wallace had to go to Owens Valley to do the necessary field work on the project. The three-day journey started on the overland train to Reno followed by transfers to the Virginia and Truckee Railroad and to the narrow gauge Carson and Colorado Railroad for the final leg down the length of the Owens Valley to Lone Pine.

With income from the project not covering living expenses, Mary enterprisingly made arrangements to earn their keep at the local boardinghouse by cooking. Although housekeeping never was her strong point, cooking and baking she enjoyed, and she did them well. The miner boarders taught her about their work, completely unexplored territory for her, and from her new Mexican friends in the community she was acquiring a fund of information that established a lifetime interest.

1891 Wedding Picture

For the birth of their daughter Ruth in October, 1892, Mary traveled to her mother's home in Bakersfield, a trip initiated by an arduous thirty-six-hour stagecoach ride to Mojave where she caught the train from Los Angeles. On the stagecoach her condition gave her the privilege of riding with the driver, and this arrangement suited her so well she usually managed to get this seat on future trips, often driving the team of four herself.

Upon her return to Owens Valley she discovered her husband's business project had not fared any better than his farming effort, and they were in serious financial difficulties. Actually, Wallace was well educated, a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley and qualified to teach, but he disliked teaching and continued to try, not too successfully, to create irrigation projects for the Owens Valley, always anticipating a profitable business possibility.

Not one to let problems go unsolved, Mary engineered a plan to get them out of debt, paying off some bills from the sale of their property in Bakersfield and arranging installment payments for the remainder. Unsettled conditions followed them during the next three years as Wallace moved the family about, teaching in George's Creek north of Lone Pine for awhile, homesteading for a short period of time in the Alabama Hills, and working at a series of odd jobs throughout the valley.

Feeling the need to establish her own identity and pursue a writing career, Mary with her little girl moved to Bishop in 1895 where she had accepted a teaching position at the Inyo Academy. This move fueled gossip among the townspeople who considered it improper for a woman to work if she had a husband, and particularly unacceptable that she leave the little girl alone at home all day while she taught. After a time she boarded Ruth with a local family, and with what energy she had left after a long teaching day she wrote. At the end of two years in Bishop Mary returned to Lone Pine to teach in the school were Wallace was already teaching, and when he became superintendent the following year she finished his contract.

Without consulting Mary, however, Wallace soon gave up the superintendency post to become registrar of the Desert Land Office in Independence. It disturbed her that he had not discussed with her a new job until the deal was done, and personally she did not see the move to Independence as furthering her career. Thus with Ruth she abruptly moved to Los Angeles and obtained a teaching position at Normal School for the year (1899).

The move to Los Angeles enabled Mary to sharpen the skills she had tested in the Bay Area when she had established a friendship with Ina Coolbrith. The key person in linking her with the Los Angeles literary and art world would be Charles Lummis, writer of Indian-Mexican cultures of the Southwest. Lummis shared with her his knowledge of these cultures, which along with her own would be reflected in much of her later writing.

At the completion of the school year, resigned to the inevitability of the move to Independence if she was going to maintain her marriage, Mary returned to Owens Valley where she and Wallace began designing and building the house on Market Street. Settled down, she resumed serious writing and researching.

With the desert as her laboratory for observing plants and animal life, she would put Ruth in a knapsack on her back and go for long walks. The Paiute families became her friends as she learned their language, their crafts, and their ways. The Indian women's ability to combine their domestic life and their artistic life, uniting nature and culture, fascinated her. They taught her their craft of basket making, from gathering the reeds to weaving them into sturdy but intricately designed finished products. The art of meditation had long interested Mary, and the Indian medicine man's skills in this arena particularly intrigued her.

In the house on Market Steert Mary completed her great masterpiece, *The Land of Little Rain.* Published in 1903, it became a hit in the literary world, and Wallace praised the book to everyone, showing great pride in his wife's accomplishment. Mary felt, however, she could have done better and that it did not reach the literary standards she had set for herself. Nor did the people of Independence accept the book positively, believing it to be untrue and fanciful. But then they were not too tolerant of Mary with her frequent absences from her husband, her unorthodox treatment of her child, her rift with the Methodist Church when she advocated Bible readings not approved by the local church, and her friendliness with the Indian community.

At this time the growing conflict between the people of Owens Valley and the city of Los Angeles united the Austins in a common cause as they tried to preserve the valley's water for its people. In the course of his work on a federal reclamation project Wallace discovered Los Angeles water people had been secretly buying valley land under false pretenses. He attempted to expose a federal agent's collusion with Los Angeles city officials when the agent ordered work stopped on the reclamation project to allow the Los Angeles water project to proceed. Wallace tried to rally the people and to arouse Washington, going so far as to write a letter to President Theodore Roosevelt. With him Mary encouraged the people to fight to retain their water rights and wrote an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that brought the matter to a head by directing attention to the federal people invovled in the scheme and to the subversive tactics of the Los Angeles officials. Their efforts to keep the water for Owens Valley, however, did not succeed,

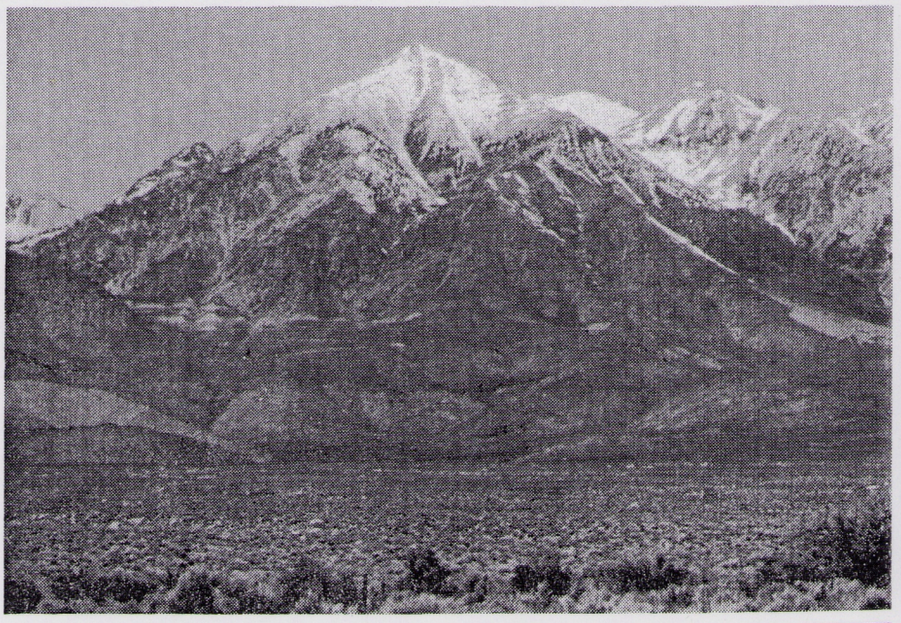
and Mary was totally disheartened at the prospects of what would become of her beloved land.

With her valley ecologically disintegrating and her marriage in not much better shape, Mary left for San Francisco and on to Carmel to do research for a book on mission life. On this visit to San Francisco and Carmel she met more literary stars that included the handsome, tragic poet George Sterling, novelist Jack London, legendary John Muir, and short-story writer and journalist Jimmy Hopper.

Returning to Independence with renewed energy and inspiration, she soon finished *The Basket Woman*, a collection of Indian tales for children published in 1904, and the following year published *Isidro,* her novel about mi sion life.

Ruth, though a beautiful child, was failing to develc normally. She did not speak, cried excessively, and threw frequent tantrums. Finally, in 1905, after a year observation in Santa Clara, Ruth was formally admitte to a sanitarium. Mary agreed with doctors that the chil would be happier in controlled conditions where she w accepted as she was, and further, she knew she coul not provide proper care herself. Although Mary was ne er to see her daughter again and referred to her where abouts as "We have lost her," this decisive act concern ing Ruth created an emotional scar that remained wi her forever.

Casa Querida, Mary Austin's home in Santa Fe, now a private art gallery



Kearsarge Peak from west end of Market Street in Independence; photos by Bill Webster

After the devastating decision on her daughter, Mary concentrated on finishing *The Flock,* a book about sheepherding and based on what she had observed at the Tejon Ranch and from sheepherders she knew in the Eastern Sierra. Reliving more pleasant times lifted her spirits, and the book was published in 1906.

That same year the aqueduct to Los Angeles was moving ahead rapidly and the need for the Desert Land Office ceased, leaving Wallace once again seeking work. Mary writes in her autobiography that at that time her inner voice told her to leave the valley and never return. Too, she was suffering from heart trouble and felt a move to lower elevation would be beneficial. Thus the Austins left Independence, Mary going to Carmel and Wallace to Death Valley. Although they lived apart for many years, they were not formally divorced until 1914.

Although Mary never returned to the Owens Valley, her feelings for it were lasting, and as she wrote about her desert, her mountains, the Indians, the Mexicans, and the miners she expressed these feelings again and again.

On the move to Carmel a stop in San Francisco left a lasting memory. Comfortably settled in the elegant Palace Hotel, Mary's mystic sense told her of impending disaster, and she decided to spend the night with friends rather than in the hotel. Early the following morning, April 18, 1906, the great earthquake hit, severely damaging the Palace.

An exciting two years were to follow in Carmel. Liberated from her previous responsibilities, she finally concentrated all of her energy on writing. From a wealthy developer who was giving land to artists and writers who would settle in that secluded seashore community she acquired a piece of property. The Carmel artists' colony included her friends from San Francisco, Jack London, George Sterling, and Jimmy Hopper, and knowing that her professional accomplishments were respected by this group, she found their company a continual source of intellectual energy and self-renewal.

Although she did not build on her land immediately, Mary had her wick-i-up, meaning "shelter" in the Paiute language. Here on a simple platform in an oak tree, accessible by ladder, she wrote and often entertained friends.

Not long after settling in Carmel she learned that a nagging illness was terminal, giving her an urgency to travel to places she had always intended to visit. Thus the years 1908 and 1909 found her in Europe. She traveled directly to the Vatican to investigate a special method of prayer, and whether her mental powers of prayer overcame the disease, her illness miraculously disappeared and she survived another quarter century.

Especially rewarding experiences awaited her in London where she stayed with friends from Carmel, Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Hoover. Here she added many of England's major literary figures to her growing circle of friends, including H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and William Yeats.

In London, far removed from her precious desert land, she saw her book *Lost Borders* published in 1909, a compilation of tales of desert people she had gathered from Indians over the years. It was written in the style of *The Land of Little Rain,* and readers especially appreciated that she had returned to her original stories of the desert. This book differed from the first, though, in that it focused on people of the desert rather than the flora and fauna.

Proximity to New York publishers Mary believed crucial to further her career, and upon her return to the United States in 1910 she took up residence in Manhattan. Finding earnings from writing inadequate to support the standard of living to which she aspired, she turned to lecturing as a principal means of livelihood, an endeavor that over the next dozen years would take her countrywide, allowing for annual visits to California and time in the renewing community of Carmel.

Though New York continued to irritate her as she fought constantly the provincial Eastern literary establishment and its inability to accept the West as a topic worthy of literature, the period was extremely fruitful, her work continuing to reflect her life in the Eastern Sierra. Her 1917 novel, *The Flood,* written in New York, was set in the Owens Valley, and *The Land of Journey's End,* written in the style of *The Land of Little Rain* and based on the desert, was published in 1924. *The Arrow Maker,* a play produced on Broadway, brought its New York audience a tale revolving around the Indian culture with which she was so familiar. Lecture tours continued and were broadened to include speeches on the women's suffrage movement and during World War I on behalf of relief efforts.

The weekly gatherings of writers, artists, and often radical politicos at the elegant New York home of wealthy socialite Mabel Dodge further increased the number of friends, including such superstars of the literary world as Lincoln Steffens, Sinclair Lewis, Willa Cather, Fannie Hurst, and Hendrik William Van Loon. Always an individual and not hesitant to do the unpredictable, Mary often wore Western dress and Indian jewelry to the fashionable soirees, delighting in the stir she caused.

In 1918 devastating news of Ruth's death closed an old, unhappy chapter in her life. The old feelings of pain, guilt, and helplessness of not having a perfect child filled her with grief as she traveled to California to make final arrangements.

Returning to the East by way of Santa Fe, New Mexico, to do research on Indian archeology, she became enchanted with the city's old world charm, and the combination of desert and mountains reminded her of the Owens Valley, renewing her spirits. In Santa Fe she immersed herself in work at the School of American Research, still one of the country's richest sources for Indian research. She also threw herself into community activities, lecturing, and organizing a theater group. Although she did not make New Mexico her permanent home until 1924, she spent considerable periods of time in Santa Fe and Taos, actively participating in the artists and writers groups and working on community projects.

Again she built a house, one that she designed herself in typical Santa Fe style in a section of the city home to many other writers and artists. Casa Querida, or Beloved House, at 439 Camino del Monte Sol, now a private art gallery, soon became a hub for artists and writers, and here Willa Cather wrote her final chapter of *Death Comes for the Archbishop.*

Young Ansel Adams and his wife stayed at Mary's home when he collaborated with her on *Taos Pueblo,* a collection of photographs and essays published in 1930 about the Indian village near Taos. In a later book published in 1950 after Mary's death the famous photographer furnished photographs of the Owens Valley area to illustrate a special edition of *The Land of Little Rain.*

View of Independence and the Owens Valley from Onion Valley Road ascending toward Kearsarge Pass, where Mary and Wallace often camped

Alabama Hills, described by Mary as "rounded, blunt, burned, squeezed out of chaos, chrome and vermillion painted, aspiring to the snow line;" photos by Bill Webster

The Alabama Hills contain two types of rock. One is an orange, drab weathered metamorphosed volcanic rock that is 150-200 million years old. The other is 82- to 85-million-year-old biotite monzogranite formed into potato-shaped large boulders, many of which now stand on end because of weathering around the predominantly vertical cracks in the rock.

Mary's contributions in Santa Fe were many, among which was the founding of the Indian Arts Fund in 1925, organized to preserve native culture of the Indians and now part of the School of American Research. Her outspoken ways continued as she thwarted the local Chamber of Commerce's scheme to allow a group of Texas women to set up a summer cultural center in Santa Fe in 1926. The Old Santa Fe Association, organized to preserve Old Santa Fe and guide future growth to retain distinct characteristics of the city, owed its origination in 1926 to Mary Austin. In 1927 she appeared before a DAR committee to protest its donation of a statue to the city, Madonna of the Trail, to mark the Santa Fe Trail arguing that the monument did not represent Santa Fe's real pioneers who she contended were Spanish and who had not been consulted in the decision. Saving the Indian and Mexican cultures of the Southwest continued to be important outlets for her energy during her years in Santa Fe.

Mary Austin's last major work was her autobiography *Earth Horizon* published in 1932. Writing it turned out to be difficult and painful as she relived her life. Her meticulous detail, however, has earned this book the honor of being considered a first-class social history. Unlike most autobiographies, she wrote this one mostly in the third person as if she was writing about another Mary, and in it she described the two people inside her — the "I-Mary," her outer, confident, public, writing self, the I-can-do-anything Mary, and the "Mary-by-herself," the inner, vulnerable, dependent self.

Throughout her busy, productive, and rewarding life in Santa Fe Mary unfortunately was plagued with a series of illnesses that frequently required her to travel great distances to seek medical assistance, always managing to fit in lectures and visits to old friends on these excursions. A heart attack during a trip East to introduce her autobiography, however, signaled the beginning of seriously failing health. Trying with all her strength to continue her disciplined writing schedule and public commitments back in Santa Fe, she had to admit to herself that she definitely was not well.

The evening of August 13, 1934, a month short of her sixty-sixth birthday, Mary suffered a final heart attack as she slept. At her request her ashes were sealed in the rocks near the summit of Mt. Picacho in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains overlooking the valley of Santa Fe, a fitting final resting place for someone who saw beauty

James Hopper with Mary Austin in 1906, in her Carmel treehouse, her studio she referred to as her "wick-i-up" (shelter); reproduction by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

and movement in a "land of little rain" and recorded the desert for posterity.

As suggested by Professor T.M. Pearce of the University of New Mexico in his introduction to the 1974 reprint of *The Land of Little Rain,* Mary Austin's adult life fit into the three groupings of the human race she depicted in her 1910 novel *Outland.* During her time in California she was a "Woodlander," a creative spirit living close to nature. In her New York period she belonged to the "Far People," people in cities supported by industry and factories. And for her years in Santa Fe she was part of the "House Folk" or "People of Ploughed Field," settlers on farms and in small communities.

Although she may have belonged to all three groups, her writing clearly reflected her time as a Woodlander, when she had studied the land and people of the desert to build her stories and essays. She coined the term "Amerindian," probably based on her appreciation of Indian names that were straightforward and self-explanatory, and she incorporated in her writing the Indian's ability to use words sparingly to convey the meaning.

Mary Austin's poetic prose brought the desert to life and made its people believable. Although a Midwest native and citizen of the world, she could be said t truly a daughter of Owens Valley. Here the de became part of her inner self that through her w she shared with others, and beginning with *The La Little Rain* her beautiful writing has become an endu part of Western literature and history.

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Little Pothole Lake on the trail to Kearsarge Pass, country where Mary and Wallace Austin often camped; photo by Bill Webster

John & Mary

MUIR GETS THE GOOD PRESS; AUSTIN IS A GREAT READ

"But if you ever come beyond the borders as far as the town that lies in a hill dimple at the foot of Kearsarge, never leave it until you have knocked at the door of the brown house under the willow-tree at the end of the village street, and there you shall have such news of the land, its trails, and what is astir in them, as one lover of it can give to another."

MARY AUSTIN, "THE LAND OF LITTLE RAIN" (1903)

You can still visit Mary Austin's house just off U.S. Highway 395 in Independence.

There, you will find the passage above still inviting fellow lovers of the land more than a hundred years later, set in bronze before the home in which she lived while she was writing her Eastern Sierra classic.

I stop by every time I journey south and spend a few moments' meditation trying to see this landscape as Mary may have seen it, how Mary might interpret its changes today, and how both of us might see the changes yet to come.

While Austin lived and wrote her masterpiece at the end of this tree-shaded street, she also fought Los Angeles' claims to Owens Valley water and advocated for the rights of local Native American people.

At the same time, over on the west side, John Muir was fighting the Hetch Hetchy dam and working to save Yosemite as a national park. Though I dearly love the tales of both these fellow travelers, I sometimes think ecological and cultural insights offered in Austin's writing have been unfortunately overshadowed by Muir's popularity.

Of course, Muir's fame does not depend entirely on his literary achievements. I imagine there are many people who have trudged the entire John Muir Trail who have never slogged through his *My First Summer in the Sierra*. I myself have dragged many poor college students through it, even though I know they would have rather been hiking it.

On the other hand, almost anyone who knows Mary Austin knows her only because they have read her compelling portraits of how life was actually lived by residents—the plants, the animals, and the people—of these desert mountains. While Muir still inspires multitudes to seek adventure and spiritual solitude among the glaciated pinnacles of his "Range of Light," many of Austin's readers, including those of us who choose to call the Eastern Sierra home, know how much her dramatic depiction of our region's social and environmental realities can inspire ongoing concern for "the land, the trails, and what is astir in them."

Reading John Muir helps us understand the special value wild things and wild places hold historically in our national psyche; it helps us understand and cherish our preservation of them. Muir's writing helped make these things sacred to Americans. His writing also did much to encourage their transformation from shrines into recreational travel attractions.

If good old "John 'O Mountains" was Nature's most divinely inspired priest, he was her best publicist as well. Do you remember how Muir, returning to the lowlands, finally finishes his *First Summer*?

"Here ends my forever memorable first High Sierra excursion. I have crossed the Range of Light, surely the brightest and best of all the Lord has built; and rejoicing in its glory, I gladly, gratefully, hopefully pray I may see it again."

In Mary Austin's writings, by contrast, the mountains and deserts of the Eastern Sierra are much more than places of pilgrimage for solitary seasonal ecstasy. They are places where careful observation of—and responsible relation with—plants, animals, and peoples belonging to particular environments are required for individual survival and sustainable community.

From her home at the foot of Kearsarge, Austin saw a land that could—if we would give it enough attention—show us how to live with it, and with each other.

Fortunately, you can still find "The Land of Little Rain" and other great reads by Mary Austin available in Eastern Sierra visitor centers and bookstores. For starters, any complete library of classic Eastern Sierra literature should also include "The Country of Lost Borders," "The Flock," and "The Basket Woman"—all currently in print in paperback editions.

Mark Schlenz lives in Swall Meadows with his wife, Jane Freeburg. He taught environmental literature at the University of California Santa Barbara. He is author of an introduction to Mary Austin's "The Basket Woman," published in 1999 by the University of Nevada Press.

Life after 'Little Rain'

Mary Austin found freedom after her California masterpiece but no new muse.

PETER RICHARDSON

Mary Austin and the American West
Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson
University of California Press:
324 pp., $29.95

1-25-2009

Few writers of her period overcame more obstacles than Mary Austin. Stuck in a disappointing marriage, Austin (1868-1934) spent the 1890s attending to her developmentally disabled daughter and teaching school in the bookless Owens Valley, where her literary aspirations seemed absurd. But her writing about the California desert and its inhabitants managed to find its place in the Atlantic Monthly, and she then wrote a slender masterpiece, "The Land of Little Rain," in 1903.

At that time, Americans were consuming a vast literature on the West and its exotica. Blending local color and nature writing, "The Land of Little Rain" transcends both genres. Much of its charm depends on humanizing an inhospitable and seemingly empty landscape. "There are three kinds of noises buzzards make, — it is impossible to call them notes, — raucous and elemental," Austin observes. "There is a short croak of alarm, and the same syllable in a modified tone to serve all the purposes of ordinary conversation."

The book's loosely arranged sketches are as unpredictable as they are original. Their central symbol is water, which Robert Hass has noted is "what marriage is in a novel by Jane Austen: the element that explains everything." As if to underscore Hass' point, one chapter begins by echoing the opening line of "Pride and Prejudice": "It is the proper destiny of every considerable stream in the West to become an irrigating ditch."

Originally published as a holiday book, "The Land of Little Rain" established Austin as a professional writer. She soon shrugged off her husband, institutionalized her daughter and spent the next decades moving restlessly from one bohemian enclave to the next, making stops in Carmel, London, Greenwich Village and finally Santa Fe. Mixing fiction, poetry, journalism, plays and political advocacy, Austin eventually produced a large body of work and formed an impressive literary network.

Austin's itinerancy broadened her outlook, but it didn't lead to superior writing or financial success. Her versatility and activism lured her away from her strengths, which she later identified as "the relation of letters and landscape, of life and its environment." Even she concluded that she had spent too many years of her life, as her latest biographers note, "potboiling in the wrong kitchens." When she died in 1934, she left little that matched "The Land of Little Rain."

The arc of Austin's career would present a challenge for any biographer, but, in "Mary Austin and the American West," Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson meet that challenge head on. They pore over Austin's spirited correspondence and map her extensive contacts, which came to include Jack London, Herbert Hoover, D.H. Lawrence and Willa Cather. They track her advocacy on women's issues and on the preservation of Indian and Mexican culture in the Southwest. Sifting through her published work, they acknowledge its shortcomings, attributing most of them to her need for income. They also compare her to contemporaries, including John Muir, who shared Austin's astonishing powers of observation but lacked her feeling for people and culture.

The force of Austin's personality wafts up from Goodman and Dawson's portrait. As a professional lecturer and self-styled expert on race, gender and psychic phenomena, Austin offered her opinions freely and magisterially. In an unfinished Lawrence play, a character based on Austin says, "Won't you all sit down and discuss the situation, while I solve it?" Her pronouncements produced an occasional irony. Having claimed that she preferred an unfaithful man to a stingy husband, for example, she was flummoxed when Lincoln Steffens put that assertion to the test. (After he terminated their affair, she threatened to demand reparations for loss of work and suffering.) But Austin could deploy irony as well. Proposing a literary collaboration with Sinclair Lewis, she wrote, "I know I'm feminine, damnably feminine, and not ashamed of it, but I'm not ladylike. You can count on my behaving like a gentleman." Her blend of brass and innocence exasperated some and endeared her to others.

Goodman and Dawson make the most of Austin's personality and peregrinations. In the end, however, their portrait suggests that Austin's most important literary contribution preceded the invention of her public persona. Perhaps compensating for that suggestion, they commit a rare exaggeration when they claim that she became "the voice of the American West." For a book whose title stresses that vast and variegated region, this one misses several opportunities to consider Austin's direct influence on younger Western writers. Goodman and Dawson mention her connection to Louis Adamic and Carey McWilliams, for example, but make surprisingly little of the fact that Austin introduced McWilliams to the water controversy that engulfed the Owens Valley during her years there. McWilliams' account of that incident inspired Robert Towne's Oscar-winning screenplay for "Chinatown," one of the finest American films of its generation. The authors say little about McWilliams' work and pass over the film in silence. They do, however, cite parallels between Cather's work and Austin's, Ansel Adams' claim that Austin influenced his photography, and Edward Abbey's acknowledgment that Austin was a precursor.

Minor factual errors and editorial lapses dot the narrative. Goodman and Dawson claim that Muir farmed in the San Joaquin Valley; in fact, he grew fruit in the East Bay. These oversights make it more difficult to accept the book's grandest claim, but they don't diminish its main achievement: a complete portrait of a strong female writer set against dramatic backdrops, one of which was her main subject. As for the arc of Austin's career, let the record show that she produced one more masterpiece than most artists.

Writing Austin's obituary for this newspaper, McWilliams asked readers to imagine "a woman with the emotional background and experience of an American housewife, the stout mental courage of a Huxley, and a streak of ineradicable mysticism, and you have a fair understanding of the incongruous traits that were dominant in Mary Austin." Bringing these and other traits to the surface for a full and honest inspection, Goodman and Dawson's judicious biography makes a worthy contribution to our understanding of the literary West.

Richardson lectures on California culture at San Francisco State. His forthcoming book on the history and influence of Ramparts magazine is scheduled for publication this fall.

The 100-degree summer heat of the Owens Valley desert as well as the steep alpine canyons reaching towards Kearsarge Pass were naturalist writer Mary Austin's stomping grounds during her years in Independence, memorialized in *The Land of Little Rain*. The tiny volume with its lovely descriptions will soon be reprinted in a fresh edition. MARCH 2009

Mary Austin's home still stands in Independence, the place that inspired her book *Land of Little Rain*.

MARY AUSTIN

"Live long enough with an Indian," she wrote in her most famous volume, *The Land of Little Rain*, published in 1903, "and he or the wild things will show you a use for everything that grows in these borders."

Austin, born in Illinois in 1868, made her home in Independence, Calif., just two blocks west of U.S. Highway 395 for a dozen years after marrying Stafford Wallace Austin in 1891. She was the first writer in the high desert region to explore the southern Sierra and Mojave Native American cultures with educated perception. *The Land of Little Rain* would prove to be her first and most enduring work (a 1950 edition of the book featured photographs by Ansel Adams). In 1999, the San Francisco Chronicle Book Review named it number one on its Western 100 list, with a handful of chapters on Shoshone culture.

Other chapters in *The Land of Little Rain* give readers a sense of how it used to be when "a day's ride carries one to the lake regions" high up above Onion Valley where the cement road now ends. "The passes are steep and windy ridges, though not the highest. By two and three thousand feet the snow-caps overtop them. It is even possible to wind through the Sierras without having passed above timberline, but one misses a great exhilaration."

Austin was the first writer to draw attention to the little-visited region of Eastern California before the water disputes with the City of the Angels began. And it was being on the losing side of those water disputes – when Owens Valley water was drained to supply Los Angeles – that Austin and her husband abandoned the Eastern Sierra, she for Carmel and he for Death Valley.

The house they designed and built still stands on the quiet streets of the small town. Though it is closed to the public, a bronze plaque commemorates Austin's voice – a writer who was precise in her knowledge as well as lyrical with her words and who once invited all to share in the lore of the region.

"If you ever come beyond the borders as far as the town that lies in a hill dimple at the foot of Kearsarge, never leave it until you have knocked at the door of the brown house under the willow at the end of the village street, and there you shall have such news of the land, of its trails and what is astir in them, as one lover of it can give to another."

Mary Austin

BY CAREY McWILLIAMS 1934

I knew Mrs. Austin too well to write of her in an elegiac mood. In sorting over an accumulation of impressions, the vivid realities of her character somehow defy the soft threnodic note.

Imagine a woman with the emotional background and experience of an American housewife, the stout mental courage of a Huxley, and a streak of ineradicable mysticism, and you have a fair understanding of the incongruous traits that were dominant in Mary Austin. Naturally the combination of these traits did not always make for consistency or even for well-ordered expression. The emotional background got out of hand in her novels; the mysticism occasionally trespassed upon her thinking. The "hard-headed" Mary Austin, who could pack an essay with shrewd good sense, had an irrepressible fondness for "spiritual concepts too fresh for exact definition,—experience too ebullient to be contained in set moulds." Some of her books (i.e. Everyman's Genius) are amazing compilations of sharp insight and awkward bombast But one should remember that she belonged to that generation of "titanesses," both great and ridiculous, that Thomas Beer satirized in "The Mauve Decade."

Eastern critics never quite understood the combination of tribal prophetess, motherly titaness, and original thinker that was Mary Austin. For she had bludgeoned them into according her the reputation she enjoyed. During the last years of her life, in fact, she had them thoroughly cowed; in tone and manner she seemed to be daring them not to concede her importance. In terror of her somewhat formidable personality, they wrote of her as she wanted them to write. In even the most fulsome of their notices, however, one could detect a veiled incredulity. But they did not fool Mrs. Austin. She accepted their attention with amusing blandness, inwardly pleased over the success of her campaign for recognition.

* * *

She has been called "odd and brusque," "harsh and eccentric," even in the eulogies that have appeared since her death. But those qualities, if apparent at times, never impressed those who knew her austerity of character and integrity of mind. "A Woman Alone," as she called herself in an unsigned autobiographical contribution to The Nation some years ago, her courage was truly superb. I have never known a more heroic mind. She had fought from childhood, with untiring determination and under the most discouraging circumstances, for the life that she had willed to live. The obstacles that crowded in upon her career can never be catalogued. Illness, sorrow, poverty and humiliation dogged those early years, exacting an incredible toll of energy and courage. Even those who have read "Earth Horizon" cannot realize the suffering she endured; like a character in one of Conrad's stories, she was "unhappy in a way unknown to mediocre souls."

* * *

Mary Austin became, in many respects, the most remarkable woman her generation produced in America. Almost alone among the women of this generation, she seized upon its genuine values while repudiating its shoddy gentility. Kind, generous, and practical, like the housewife of her day, she had a bold and original mind. With the widest range of intellectual interests, she had a splendid appreciation of the pleasant quality of everyday experience, which she was careful never to malign. When over 60 years of age, she went about the writing of a new book with the same assured competence that she entered a garden or kitchen. There was a rather amusing matronliness about even her attitude toward the arts. Nor did she ever abandon the dowdy housewives of her generation; on the contrary, she fought their battles on every front. Her witty and sensible lectures, once considered incendiary feminism, represented her effort to lift the weight of apathy from the mind of the American housewife; in other words, to goad the Titaness to the travail of thought. Incidentally, Mrs. Austin knew how to bait clubwomen. I have see her lecture, in the innocent light of noon, arrayed in stunning purple evening gown with a rustling train, and a necklace and earrings of burnished gold, to an audible murmur of "Ohs" and "Ahs" and "Did you ever. . . ."

* * *

Out of a sincere concern for her reputation, one hastens to concede that her books are of uneven merit. She became befogged in a welter of emotion in writing a novel; the unconquered Titaness would not be downed. Of the novels, "The Ford," which deals with the battle for the water of Owens Valley, and "26 Jayne Street," are perhaps the best. Although inept as a novelist, she wrote, in "Isidro, one of the finest California historical romances. The stories collected in "The Basket Woman," "Lost Borders" and "One-Smoke Stories" show how perfectly she had mastered the direct and easy intimacy of the folk-tale. With typical western audacity, she had her say about the two major traditions of European history: Christianity and the Renaissance ("The Man Jesus" and "Christ in Italy.) But, if you would know her best work, "crammed and replete with the power of desolate places," read "The Flock" and "The Land of Little Rain" (minor classics, these two,) "The Lands of the Sun," one of her finest books, and "The Land of Journey's Ending."

* * *

All the varied activities of her career—her untiring effort for the preservation of the Indian handicraft arts, for the revival of Spanish colonial architecture, her forays into the folk-art of Mexico, her furious assault upon the Texas clubwomen who would have made Taos another Chautauqua—were merely expressions of her profound desire that the west might someday create a culture worthy of the land. She devoutly believed that the Southwest was destined to be the center of the "next great and fructifying world culture." But by culture she meant something more intimate and vital than marble palaces and ornate museums; she wanted the new races that had poured into this dramatic region where great civilizations had once flourished, to achieve a real personal integration with their natural environment. She had in mind, of course, an indigenous culture. To this end, she furnished the west with faith, program, tradition, and ideas. By example and precept she preached the domestication of culture; bluntly and vigorously, she scored the cult of exoticism.

The value of her criticism is likely to be underestimated for the reason that she had a mystic's weakness for pushing an idea to the point where enthusiasm went beyond definition and intuition eluded understanding But whatever one may think of her work, it is impossible to escape its significance or to deny that she saw her task clearly and stuck to it heroically. By every means at her disposal, she wanted to explore the cultural resources of the west. This she succeeded in doing, and it is unreasonable to expect more of a trail-blazer than a trail clearly blazed.

The Flock 1906 hardcover
Signed by Mary Watterson Gotham

Earth Horizon 1932 hardcover

Lost Borders 1909 hardcover
First edition

The Land of Little Rain 1903 hardcover
" " " " " 1961 soft cover

Cactus Thorn 1988 hardcover

Mary Austin and the American West 2008
hardcover by Susan Goodman & Carl Dawson

Stories From The Country of Lost Borders
soft cover 1987

Mary Hunter Austin wrote her most famous book "The Land of Little Rain" while living in Independence. The author was born in September of 1868. After publication of "The Land of Little Rain" in 1903, Austin went on to become a popular and prolific author, whose 30 books and other works of fiction, plays, essays and non-fiction depicted the unique desert environment of the West, and more specifically, the Mojave Desert and the Eastern Sierra. Critics note that Austin was a "prominent voice in early 20th Century American literature." The universal themes she pursued in her writing resonate today, with many of her books still in print. (The Eastern California Museum Bookstore carries about a dozen of her titles.) Her work remains some of the most enjoyable and educational writing about man's impact on a unique desert environment.

Photo courtesy of the Eastern California Museum

Mary Austin (1868 - 1934), a resident of Independence, was one of the early nature writers of the American Southwest and the author of the book "Land of Little Rain." The book describes the fauna, flora and people – as well as evoking the mysticism and spirituality – of the region between the High Sierra and the Mojave Desert. The novelist and essayist also wrote about Native American culture and social problems. Mt. Mary Austin is named in her honor.

File photo

Mary Hunter Austin Society
(as of 7-15-1996)
219 Kiwanis Drive # } ? B3 or 83
Mason, MI 48854

1998
MAH Society 511 E. 1st South
Carlinville, Illinois
abprof@aol.com

Photo by Jeremiah Caudill

The Mary Austin House, located in Independence, is one of the many landmarks in Inyo County

Mary Austin local history binder

Compiled by Bob Larson (1934-2024).

Collection of magazine articles, newspaper clippings, and other printed ephemera related to noted Owens Valley author Mary Austin (1868-1934).

Item compiled by/from the collection of Robert Wood "Bob" Larson (1934-2024). Bob Larson was a teacher at Salinas High School in Salinas, California for many years. He inherited his aunt Enid A. Larson's home in Big Pine, Inyo County, California in 1991, and permanently relocated to Big Pine in 2013. He continued his aunt Enid's penchant for Owens Valley History, and he collected articles and books on the natural and human history of Inyo County.

Includes a listing of contents at the end of the document, created by ICFL staff in Feb 2026.

Item from the collection of the Inyo County Free Library local history room collection. Scanned in February 2026.

Background:

Mary Hunter Austin (1868-1934) was a noted American author considered to be one of the early nature writers of the American Southwest. She is best known for her book *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), which details the people, animals, plants, and landscapes of the Owens Valley and Mojave Desert regions of California. Austin lived in the Inyo County towns of Independence and Bishop during the 1890s and 1900s decades, where she worked as a teacher as she began her writing career.

Austin acted as a spokesperson for the Owens Valley residents opposing the diversion of Owens River to the city of Los Angeles during the early 1900s. She relocated to Carmel, California around 1906. Austin later moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico around 1924, and died there in 1934.

From the Inyo County Free Library Local History Room Collection. Uploaded to the Internet Archive by Inyo County Free Library in February 2026.

Binder contents (in order of appearance):

Newspaper article: *Inyo Register* (Bishop, Inyo County, California), 5 Nov 2011, p. A-6: "Mary Austin writing contest winners 2011"; includes pieces written by Natalie Gonzalez, Alekos McKee, Jamey Wilcher, Sydney Velasquez, Amy Friedrichsen

Journal article: *The Journal of California Anthropology*, Jul 1975, p. 38-43: "Andrew A. Forbes – Photographs of the Owens Valley Paiute" by Jon Bosak [black and white photocopy]

Magazine article: *Sierra Life*, Nov 1981, p. 22-26: "Sierra Profile… Mary Austin – Her words were one with the mountains" by Candace Ross [black and white photocopy]

Newspaper clipping: *Inyo* Register, 24 Jun 2017, p. 17: Photograph of lightening over a street; caption: "A thunderstorm happened above Bishop in 1916. This picture was taken on Main Street facing south. Photo by A.A. Forbes, Laws Museum."

Magazine article: *California History*, Vol. 85 No. 1, p. 24-43: "Mary Austin and Andrew Forbes – Poetry, Photography, and the Eastern Sierra" [black and white photocopy]

Handwritten page, front and back transcribing a portion of Mary Austin's *Lost Borders* (1909) [possibly handwritten by Enid A. Larson); section beginning: "Let's be done with stranger faces…"

Photocopy of letter from Mary Austin to Mrs. John H. Lubken dated 15 Mar 1934 concerning the Lone Pine, California Writer's Guild

Periodical clipping: Unknown publication. Advertisement for the 2011 Mary Austin Prize for Writing

Letter or draft of letter from Mary Watterson Gorman to Mary Austin dated 23 April 1928. Gorman speaks about the failure of The Inyo County Bank (owned by her brothers Mark Watterson and Wilfred Watterson, who were had imprisoned at the time) and the bankruptcy of her brothers' other businesses. Includes pencil revisions and notes. Gorman notes that her brothers would welcome correspondence from Mary Austin, but that "they are undeniably political prisoners and spied upon by Los Angeles agents, we have to be very careful not [to write] anything in detail regarding the L.A. – [Owens] Valley water controversy." Gorman asks Austin if she believes they can bring about national publicity for the plight of the Owens Valley. Unsigned. Possibly original copy?

Website color printout: *New York Review of Books*, 16 Feb 2021. "The Lost Rivers of Owens Valley – Water—who owns it, who uses it—has shaped this landscape from the Paiutes' irrigation canals to the Los Angeles Aqueduct. And it is a history in which my own family played a part." By Frederic Wehrey.

Newspaper article: *San Francisco Examiner*, 7 May 2000, p. T-6: "The West that inspired author Mary Austin – Rugged Inyo County landscape little changed since mining ruled." By Beverly Lauderdale.

Magazine article: *The Album: Times and Tales of Inyo-Mono*, Oct 1992 (Vol. V, No. 4), p. 43-51: "Owens Valley's Mary Austin." By Beverly Webster.

Magazine article: Unknown publication, margin dated "May / June 2006", p. 27: "John & Mary – Muir Gets the Good Press; Austin is a Great Read" by Mark Schlenz.

Newspaper article: *Los Angeles Times*, 25 Jan 2009: "Life after 'Little Rain' – Mary Austin found freedom after her California masterpiece but no new muse"; book review of *Mary Austin and the American West* by Susan Goodman and Carl Dawson.

Magazine article: Unknown publication, hand dated March 2009. "Mary Austin." Article about *Land of Little Rain* with photo of her home at Independence.

Newspaper article: *Los Angeles Times*, 14 Sep 1934, Part II page 4: "Mary Austin" by Carey McWilliams. Obituary written by a friend of Austin, written shortly after her death on 13 Aug 1934.

Handwritten list of titles written by Mary Austin [Bob Larson's handwriting?].

Newspaper article: *Inyo Register*, 19 Oct 2019, p. A11: Photo and caption of Mary Austin.

Handwritten yellow lined paper note: "Mary Hunter Austin Society" with contact information.

Newspaper article: Unknown publication. Color photo of Mary Austin's house in Independence, captioned "The Mary Austin House, located in Independence…"